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# NIGHT CRY<sup>TM</sup>

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# NIGHT CRY

THE MAGAZINE OF TERROR

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Fall 1986

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# Introduction

by J. K. POTTER

A cure for cuteness  
and a medicine for the milquetoast.

Do you find yourself cringing whenever a certain nationally-advertised fabric softener springs its cuddly-bear mascot on you right in the middle of an intense surgery scene on *Ripley's Believe It or Not*? Do you lunge for the mute button, spilling beer and popcorn all over the carpet, in a desperate attempt to silence the sickening barrage of high-pitched baby talk?

Do you feel an irrational desire to haul out an industrial-size rolling pin and flatten the obnoxious little doughboy who works for a certain megacorporation?

Wouldn't you like to icepick that inflatable hand—the one in the ads for a certain hamburger-enhancing product—right in its bulblike nose?

If you do, this issue of *Night Cry* might be just the thing you need to ward off the rising tide of cuteness. You won't find any elves, unicorns, or munchkins in this magazine, buddy!

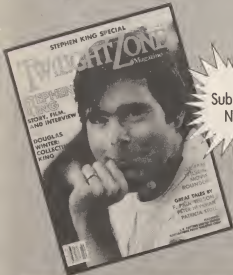
You will find a hyperactive gingerbread man, though, in David C. Kopaska-Merkel's surrealistic "The Epiphenomena of Morphogenesis." But don't worry; both you and the gingerbread man will get your (heh-heh-heh!) just desserts.

There's more surrealistic horror in Benjamin Gleisser's disturbing "Metempsychosis," a story in which a man is engulfed by cataclysmic fire—and never has the chance to repent. Which, to listen to those here in northern Louisiana ranting about hellfire and damnation, sounds all too probable to me.

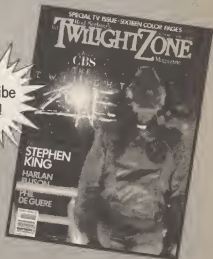
And, as if "Metempsychosis" wasn't enough to cut right through any case of the terminal cutes, J. N. Williamson also addresses the ultimate destruction—and its aftermath—in his darkly humorous "Hellter-Shelter." Watch out for Jerry; if his stories are any indication, the man is genuinely dangerous.

In the tradition of the classic television series...

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

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A. R. Morlan has a bit of black comedy for us, too: "Does It Ploop?", a story which should have a certain special relevance for the readers and writers of *Night Cry*. And, for those of you who're suffering from terminal fun-in-the-sun, we've got two tales of hard-core horror at the seashore: "Shells," by John Skipp and Craig Spector, (a story almost as depraved as some of Jerry Williamson's) and "Amymone's Footsteps," by Gary A. Braunbeck, a story that just might make you wish you'd never learned to swim.

And if all of that isn't nightmarish enough to dispel your doughboy (or at least bake him up nice and golden-brown) the characters in this issue just might come and take him away for you. Take, for instance, the *oily* Billy Neeks of Dean Koontz's "Snatcher," and the *incandescent* Flicker, in the novelette of the same name by Patricia H. Barret. Either one of them, by himself, is enough to frighten *me* away. And against the two of them, in one magazine...? That pudgy little fella doesn't stand a chance. And if they can't do it, the protagonist of John MacLay's "Locking Up" will simply *shut* him out.

And that's not all we've got waiting for you. There's a little techno-horror, "From the Desk Of"—George Alec Effinger, of course—and Avram Davidson's bizarre "Deed of the Deft-Footed Dragon," and "The Chaney Legacy," Robert Bloch's marvelous tribute to Lon Chaney, Sr. (I've always wanted a good excuse to work Chaney's perpetually-grinning vampire—from *London After Midnight*—into an illustration, and Bloch's "Chaney" certainly gave me one. Thanks, Bob.)

Polish this set off and that familiar shell-shocked expression will slowly spread across your face. You won't remember your irrational compulsion to pound that corpulent doughboy into a perfectly flat, extra-thin pizza crust.

And when your shell-shocked bliss finally wears thin enough that you can get up off the couch, why not pass this issue of *Night Cry* on to some insufferably cheerful person, someone with a nauseatingly saccharine outlook on life?

You'll be glad you did.



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# The Chaney Legacy

by ROBERT BLOCH

Dale was a real fan,  
so when he got the chance  
to move into the star's old bungalow  
he couldn't resist it.

Nobody thought Dale was crazy until the trouble started. True, he'd been a film buff ever since he was a kid, the way other youngsters sometimes get hung-up on baseball, football, or even chess. If they follow their hobby into adult life such interests can become an obsession, yet no one thinks it's a sign of insanity.

In Dale's case his studies led him into teaching a course on film history at the university, which seemed sensible enough. Certainly he appeared to be normal; he wasn't one of those wimpy professors seen in comedy films aimed at the junk-food generation.

Actually Dale was rather attractive. Debbie Curzon thought so. She was a newscaster on local radio where she met and interviewed many of the stud celebrities in sports or films; Dale must have had some *charisma* for her to choose him as a lover.

The two of them might have ended up together on a permanent basis if Dale hadn't leased the Chaney house.

That's what the realtor called it—"the Chaney house"—although Dale couldn't verify the claim and the ancient escrow was clouded. The place was really just a small cottage halfway up Nichols Canyon in the Hollywood hills. Huddled amidst a tangle of trees and underbrush on a dirt side-road which turned to quicksand during the rainy season, the weatherbeaten frame dwelling offered no exterior charm or interior comfort. Debbie's reluctance to share it was understandable, but once he found it Dale couldn't wait to move in.

"All right, do as you please," Debbie told him. "If that dump



is more important to you than sharing a brand-new condo with me—"

"It's not just a dump," Dale protested. "This is the *Chaney* house. Can't you understand?"

"Frankly, no. What makes you want to hole up in a place like this just because some dumb actor may or may not have hung out here sixty years ago?"

"Lon Chaney wasn't dumb," Dale said. "He happens to be one of the finest performers in silent films, perhaps the greatest of them all."

"Who cares?" Debbie's voice honed to a cutting-edge. "I just hope your wonderful Mr. Chaney knows how to cook and is good in bed, because from now on you'll be living with him, not me."

It was open warfare, but Dale found no weapon to pierce the armor of feminine logic. In the end Debbie told him to bug off, and he had no choice but to obey the entomological injunction.

A week later Dale moved into the Chaney house and by then everybody thought he'd flipped out. Turning down a renewal of his teaching contract now at the end of the fall semester meant losing his chance at tenure, and that certainly was a crazy decision, because he gave no reason for leaving.

But Dale knew exactly what he was going to do. He would vindicate himself in the eyes of Debbie and the academic world by writing a Hollywood history of his own—a definitive work which would answer the questions which lurked behind the legends. Who killed William Desmond Taylor, and why? Did Thomas Ince meet his death because of illness or was it murder? What really kept Garbo from returning to the screen? Had there been cover-ups in the cases of Thelma Todd or Marilyn Monroe? So much had been surmised, so little verified. And for a starter, he meant to solve the Chaney mystery.

Of all the stars of silent films, Lon Chaney was by far the most mysterious. There were books on his films but no full-length biographies except for a reporter's inaccurate magazine series following Chaney's untimely death from cancer in 1930. Chaney's first wife died without breaking silence and his second left no memoir. His son Creighton, who later changed his name to Lon Chaney Jr., was estranged from his father for many years and avoided painful memories. To this day Chaney's private life remains an enigma. "Between pictures," he told reporters, "there is

no Lon Chaney."

The coincidence of moving into one of the actor's former residences challenged Dale. Come what may, he meant to learn Lon Chaney's secret.

But first there were more practical questions to deal with. Once furniture arrived and utilities installed, he had to renovate his surroundings. The cottage had been unoccupied for many years—no wonder the realtor offered him such a bargain rental—and it was time for a thorough housecleaning.

So Dale called an agency and secured the services of an Hispanic lady named Juanita. She was short, plump, but surprisingly strong; perched on a rickety ladder she scrubbed away at the ceiling and side-walls, then descended to attack the floors with mop and brush. And on the second day she made her discovery.

Finishing up her work, she cleared out old boxes and empty cartons from the bedroom closet. The last carton, wedged in back under a jumble of debris, was not entirely empty.

"Look what I find," Juanita said, holding up her trophy for Dale's inspection.

He took the tin box from her, hefting it with both hands. Then he lifted the lid and his eyes widened.

"What is it?" Juanita asked.

The box was empty but its interior was divided into a number of small compartments lined with smudged cloth. And the underside of the lid was covered by a mirror.

"Some kind of a kit," Dale said.

It was hard to keep his voice from quavering, hard to conceal rising excitement as he paid and dismissed Juanita. When she left Dale picked up the box again and now his hands were trembling. His hands, holding Lon Chaney's makeup kit.

Dale had seen publicity stills of Chaney displaying a different and much larger kit with side trays, so this obviously wasn't the only one. What made it unique was that this box was here, in Chaney's secret hideaway.

Or was it?

Dale forced himself to face facts. In spite of the realtor's claim, he couldn't be certain that Lon Chaney ever lived here. For all he knew, the kit might have belonged to any one of a thousand actors residing in these hills when Hollywood was young.

What Dale needed was proof. And staring at the bottom of the box, he found it.

Wedged against the base was a coil of paper, a small square scrap which must have peeled off after being pasted below the mirror. Dale picked it up, smoothed it out, then read aloud the lettering typed across its surface.

"Property of Leonidas Chaney."

*Leonidas!*

This was proof and no mistake. While the general public knew the actor as Lon and most filmographies listed his first name as Alonzo, Dale was one of the few aware that the star's birth certificate identified him as Leonidas.

Chaney, born on April Fool's Day, had fooled his public. And considering his passion for privacy it seemed odd he'd put his real name here. But perhaps he'd fixed on this deception later in his career. Dale's inspection told him this battered box was old, perhaps dating back to pre-Hollywood days when Chaney was a struggling actor in traveling shows. Could this actually be his very first makeup kit?

One thing seemed certain—Chaney *had* lived here. But when?

Dale pondered the question as he sat in gathering darkness alone, with the makeup kit on the table before him.

From what little he knew, Chaney's homes were modest by Hollywood standards, even after he attained stardom, but he would never have settled his family here. Which left only one other plausible answer.

Suppose this place was really a hideaway, a place his family didn't know about, a place he came to secretly and alone? According to publicity he did have a cabin up in the mountains where he went fishing between films. Could it be that he actually spent some of that time here, perhaps even without his wife's knowledge?

And if so, why? Dale quickly dismissed the notion of a secret love-life; Chaney was never a womanizer, and even had he been, this was hardly the setting for a romantic rendezvous. Nor was he a closet alcoholic or drug-addict. In any case there'd be no reason for him to keep a makeup kit hidden here.

Dale leaned forward, peering at the box through the twilight shadows which fell across its murky mirror.

But the mirror wasn't murky now. As he stared, something in the mirror stared back.

For a moment Dale thought it was his own face, distorted by a flash of fading sunlight amidst the coming of the dark. Even

so, he realized that what he saw was not a reflection. There was another face, a face in the mirror, a ghastly white face with painted features that glowed and grinned.

With a shock he realized what it was—the face of a clown. And before Dale's widened eyes the face was melting, changing, so that now a second clown loomed leering out at him—cheeks spotted with paint and tufts of hair suddenly sprouting above a bony brow.

Dale turned, seeking a glimpse of someone else, some intruder who must have stolen silently into the bedroom to stare over his shoulder.

But save for himself the room was empty. And when his eyes sought the mirror again the face—or faces—had vanished. All he saw now was his own face reflected in the glass, its features fading in the dark.

Dale rose, stumbling across the room to switch on the overhead light. In its welcome glare he saw the makeup box and the perfectly ordinary mirror mounted within.

The clown-images were gone. They had existed only in his imagination—or was it his memory? For there had been two clowns in Chaney's life.

Hastily Dale sought his bookshelves, fumbling and finding the volume containing Lon Chaney's filmography. He riffled through it until a page fell open upon a photograph of the actor in the title role of *He Who Gets Slapped*. And now it was Dale who felt the slap of recognition. The picture showed the face of the first clown he'd seen in the mirror.

Turning pages, he located the still photo of another clown with daubed cheeks and patches of hair clumped on the bone-white skull. Chaney again, in *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*.

But there was no mirth in the painted face, and none in Dale's as he banged the book shut and left the room. Left the room, left the cottage, left the canyon to drive down to the shelter and sanity of lighted streets below.

He parked on Fairfax and entered a restaurant, taking comfort in its crowded quarters and the presence of a friendly waitress who urged him to try tonight's special. But when his order came he had no appetite for it.

Tonight had already been too special for him, and he couldn't forget his confrontation at the cottage. Had he really glimpsed those faces in the mirror, or had the images been evoked from

memories of the films seen in retrospective showings long ago? A mirror is just a sheet of silvered glass, and what it reflected must have come from his mind's eye.

Dale forced himself to eat and gradually the tension ebbed. By the time he finished and drove back up the canyon his composure had returned.

Inside the cottage the lights still blazed upon commonplace surroundings, safeguarding against shadows and dispelling doubts. If Chaney had lived here at all, that time was long-gone and the actor himself was long-dead. There were no ghosts, and the box on the bedroom table was merely an old makeup kit, not a miniature haunted house.

For a moment Dale had an impulse to lift the lid and examine the mirror for added reassurance, but he dismissed it. There was no point in dignifying his apprehensions; what he needed was a good night's sleep and a clear head for tomorrow.

Truth to tell, he felt drained after the emotional stress of the day, and once he undressed and sought his bed Dale quickly fell into dreamless slumber.

Just when the change occurred he did not know, but there *was* a change, and the dream came.

In the dream he found himself awakened, sitting up in bed and staring through darkness at the black blur of the box on the table. And now the impulse he'd rejected upon entering the bedroom returned with an urgency he could not deny.

Sometimes dreams seem oddly like films—movies of the mind in which one's own movements are silently commanded by an unseen director—a series of jump-cuts and sudden shifts in which one is both actor and audience.

Thus it was that Dale both felt and saw himself rise from the bed, captured in a full shot as he moved across the room. Now a cut to another angle, showing him poised above the makeup kit. Then came a close shot of his hand moving down to raise the lid.

Moonlight from the window sent a silvery shaft to strike the surface of the makeup mirror, flooding it with a blinding brightness that seethed and stirred.

Faces formed in the glass—contorted countenances which seemed frighteningly familiar, even in the depths of dream. Faces changed, and yet there was a lurking linkage between them, for all were oriental.



Some Dale had seen before only in photographs—the evil Chinaman from the lost film, *Bits of Life*, the benevolent laundryman in *Shadows*. Then, in rapid shifts, the vengeful mandarin of Mr. Wu, the bespectacled elderly image of Wu's father, and a final, frightening glimpse of the chinless, sunken-cheeked, shrivelled face of the aged grandfather. They formed and faded, smiling their secret smiles.

Now others appeared—the two pirates, Pew and Merry, from *Treasure Island*, a bearded Fagin out of *Oliver Twist*, followed by figures looming full-length in the mirror's depths. Here were the fake cripples of *The Miracle Man*, *The Blackbird*, *Flesh and Blood*. Then the real cripple of *The Shock* and the legless Blizzard in *The Penalty*. Now came a derby-hatted gangster, a French-Canadian trapper, a tough sergeant of Marines, a scarred animal-trapper, an elderly railroad engineer, and Echo, the ventriloquist of *The Unholy Three*.

In his dream Dale stood frozen before the glass as faces flashed forth in faster flickerings—the faces of madmen. Here was a crazed wax-museum attendant, a bearded victim of senile delusions, a deranged Russian peasant, the insane scientists of *A Blind Bargain* and *The Monster*. They were laughing at him, grinning in glee as Dale closed his eyes, hands clawing out to close the lid of the makeup kit.

Then he staggered back to the bed. There were no images here, only the darkness, and Dale fell into it, fleeing the faces and seeking surcease in sleep.

It was morning when Dale's eyes blinked open, welcoming the sanity of sunlight. He stirred, conscious now that last night had been a dream, knowing he'd seen nothing in the mirror; indeed, he had never even left his bed.

As he rose he glanced over at the box resting on the table, remembering how he'd closed it in reality before retiring, then closed it again in his nightmare.

But now the lid was up.

For a moment Dale recoiled, fighting the irrational explanation until sunlight and common sense prevailed.

The makeup kit was old, its hinges worn or even sprung. Sometime during the night the catch must have loosened and the lid popped up.

It was a logical answer, but even so he had to force himself toward the table, steel himself to gaze down into the mirror set

inside the lid and gaze on what was reflected there.

Sunshine formed a halo around the image in its glassy surface—the image of his own face.

And as his features formed a smile of rueful relief, Dale turned away. The mirror in the makeup kit held no terrors for him now, any more than the one he faced as he shaved. He dressed and sought the makeshift kitchen, taking comfort in the familiar ritual of preparing his breakfast, then eating eggs and toast with a copy of the morning *Times* propped up before his coffee cup. Even the news offered an odd comfort of its own—the familiar headlines and stories of wars, terrorist bombings, political corruption, street crime, drug-busts, accidents, epidemics, natural and unnatural disasters that filled the newspaper pages. However grim, these were realities; realities which he and everyone else in the world faced with fortitude born of long familiarity. They had nothing to do with the unhealthy fantasies which took form when Lon Chaney stalked the screen—fantasies which existed now only in Dale's imagination.

Glancing at his watch, he folded the paper and rose quickly. There was a busy day ahead, and time was already running short.

Leaving the cottage, he drove down to Hollywood Boulevard, turned right, then made a left on Fairfax. He reached Wilshire and headed west, weaving through noonday traffic until he found a parking space before the imposing structure of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Here, upstairs in the Margaret Herrick Library, he turned his attention to the files he requested. Lon Chaney wasn't the only movie monster he meant to deal with in his projected history; there was research to be done on other stars of the horror film. And unlike the case with Chaney, there was ample material on men like Karloff, Lorre, and Lugosi.

But even as he scribbled notes Dale found something lacking in the interviews and biographical data of these celebrated actors who seemingly made no mystery of their careers.

The one missing element common to all was that of explanation. Why had a gentle gentleman like Boris ended up playing monsters? What led Peter Lorre, the rabbi's grandson, to the portrayal of psychopaths? How did Bela Lugosi, who played parts ranging from Romeo to Jesus Christ in early European appearances, transform himself into Dracula?

William Henry Pratt, Laszlo Loewenstein, Bela Blasko—all

three men had changed their names, but what had changed their natures?

Dale found no answer in the files, but the last item he read before leaving the Academy offered a hint. It was an interview with an actress who toured with Lugosi in *Dracula*.

She told of how the genial cigar-smoking Hungarian prepared for his famous role, sitting before his dressing-room mirror and donning the costume and makeup of the vampire. But that was only a preliminary to performing. The next and most crucial step came as he rose, wrapped in the black cape, face contorted and eyes blazing. As he confronted himself in the mirror his deep voice invoked an incantation. "I am Dracula," he intoned. "*I am Dracula. I am Dracula.*" Over and over again he repeated the words, and by the time he strode out upon the stage the words became reality. Lugosi *was* Dracula.

"He psyched himself up," the actress explained. And as the years passed, a part of him became the part he played; when he died he was buried in Dracula's cape, with Dracula's ring on his finger.

Dale jotted down his notes, then hurried out into the afternoon sunshine. Now it was time to drive into Beverly Hills for a medical appointment.

It had been made a month ago, just an annual checkup, as a matter of routine. But now, as he arrived and took a seat in the crowded waiting room, Dale felt uptight. He felt no worry about possible physical illness, but what about psychological stress? Last night's dreams might be a symptom of mental disturbance. What if Dr. Pendleton told him he was cracking up?

By the time the receptionist called his name and a nurse led him to the examining room he knew his pulse was pounding and his blood-pressure had risen. So it came as a pleasant surprise when the doctor made no comment on his readings other than remarking he thought Dale was underweight and seemed overtired. Reports on blood-tests and urine-specimen would be available in a few days, but nothing indicated cause for concern.

"Slow down a little," Dr. Pendleton said. "Pace yourself. And it won't hurt if you put on a few pounds."

Armed with that advice Dale left. Relieved, he headed for a seafood restaurant on Brighton Way and there he ordered and actually enjoyed his meal. The doctor was probably right, Dale decided; he *had* been working too hard, and the tension flaring

up after his break with Debbie took an added toll. He resolved to follow orders, rest, and relax. Then, perhaps, it might be possible to come to terms with himself, and with Debbie too. He really missed her, missed the hours they spent together, and the breach must be mended. All in good time.

As Dale left the restaurant he sensed a change in the air; the chill breeze hinted at rain and muted murmur of distant thunder confirmed its coming.

The first drops spattered the windshield as he turned onto the canyon side-road, and by the time he parked in the driveway a flicker of lightning heralded the downpour that followed. Dale hurried into the cottage beneath the wind-tossed trees. Once inside he flipped the light switches as he moved from room to room. It was only upon reaching the bedroom that he halted when its overhead light came on.

Standing in the doorway he stared at the open makeup box on the table, forehead furrowed in doubt.

Hadn't he closed the lid before he left? Dale shrugged in uncertainty. Perhaps the loose catch was the culprit once again; he'd better examine it and put his mind to rest.

Rain drummed the rooftop in a faster tempo and lightning flashed outside the window as he crossed to the table. Then, as he reached it, a clap of thunder shook the walls and the lights went off, overhead and throughout the cottage.

Power-outages were not uncommon hereabouts during a storm and Dale wasn't alarmed; perhaps the lights would come back on in a moment. He waited, but the darkness persisted and prevailed. Perhaps he'd better look for his flashlight.

Then its illumination was unnecessary as the lightning bolt struck somewhere close outside the window, filling the bedroom with a greenish glare. As it did so Dale peered down at the mirror inside the lid of the makeup kit and froze.

The reflection peering up at him was not his own.

It was the face of Singapore Joe—the role Chaney played in *The Road to Mandalay*—the half-blind man whose left eye was covered with a ghastly white cast.

But the image seemed strangely blurred; Dale blinked to clear his vision as lightning faded and the room plunged into darkness again.

Dale's shudder wasn't prompted by the roar of thunder. It was what he'd seen that traumatized him. *The Road to Mandalay* was

one of the lost films; he knew of no print in existence. But Singapore Joe existed, in the mirror, existed in an indelible image leering up at him through the dark.

And the dark must be dispelled. Dale turned and blundered his way into the hall. Reaching the kitchen he stooped and opened the cabinet beneath the sink. Lightning outside the kitchen window came to his aid and in its moment of livid life he found and grasped the flashlight. It was not just an ordinary cylinder-type but one which terminated in a square base, projecting a strong beam of almost lanternlike intensity.

Dale switched it on, and the ray guided him back to the bedroom. As he walked his relief faded with the realization that his vision had faded too.

He was seeing only with his right eye now. The left was blind. Blind—like the eye of Singapore Joe.

*You're having a nightmare*, he told himself. But he wasn't asleep, and if there was a nightmare it had to be in the mirror of the makeup kit. Unless, of course, he was hallucinating.

There was only one way to find out, and Dale knew what he must do. Rain swept across the rooftop above, doors creaked and groaned against the onslaught of the wind, lightning glimmered, thunder growled. Only the light he gripped in his hand was reassurance; a magic lantern to protect him on his way. *Magic Lantern*—that's what they called the movies in the old days. Was there such a thing as magic?

Forcing himself toward the bedroom table, he gazed down at the glass reflected in the lantern light.

Half blind, he stared, but what he saw with his right eye was just a mirror after all. A shining surface reflecting his own familiar face.

And now his left eye cleared and he could see again. Dale took a deep breath, then expelled it hastily—for now the mirror blurred and a piercing pain shot through his lower limbs, causing him to crouch. Something pressed heavily against his spine, bowing his back.

He was changing, and the image in the mirror was changing too. He saw the tousled hair, the gargoyle grimace, the twisted limbs, the body bent beneath the hideous hump. No need to ask the identity of this image—he was gazing at Quasimodo—the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

It was Chaney he saw in the glass but he himself felt the

weight of the hump, the constriction of the harness binding it to his body, the pain inflicted by the mass of makeup covering his face, the jagged teeth wired into his mouth, the mortician's wax masking his right eye.

Realization brought relief. It was makeup, and only makeup after all. Gradually the image diffused and Dale's feeling of physical restraint faded until once again he stood erect.

Thunder rolled as the image dispelled. Dale sighed with relief; now was the time to slam down the lid of the kit once and for all.

He started to reach for it, but his hands were gone.

His hands—and his arms.

Illusion, of course, like the illusion of Chaney's face and form coming into focus beneath the mirror's shiny surface. Dale's eyes met those of the visage peering out at him from under the broad brim of a Spanish sombrero. Chaney was armless, and now Dale felt the agony of numbed circulation, the constriction of his own arms bound against his body by a tight, concealing corset. That, he remembered, had been Chaney's device when portraying the armless knife-thrower in *The Unknown*.

With the recollection his panic ebbed, and once more features and form receded into the mirror's depths. The numbness was gone from his arms now; he could lift his hands and close the lid.

Then he fell.

His legs gave way and he slumped to the floor, sprawling helplessly, the box on the table beyond his reach. All he could do was elevate his gaze, see the shaven-headed creature crawling across the glass, dead legs dragging behind him.

It was Phroso, the paralyzed cripple in *West of Zanzibar*.

No makeup had been involved in the simulation of the man who had lost the use of his lower limbs; it had been Chaney's artistry which made the role seem reality.

Knowing that, Dale strove to rise, but there was no feeling in his legs—he couldn't command them. The face in the mirror glowered at him in the lamplight, bursting into brightness as lightning flashed outside the window. The eyes were mocking him, mocking his plight, and now Dale realized that the mirror's monsters sensed his purpose and were summoned to prevent it. Their appearance in the mirror gave them life, his awareness gave them strength to survive, and that strength was growing. Closing the kit would condemn them to darkness and it was this they

fought against. They knew he couldn't close the lid, not if he were blind, armless, or paralyzed.

Frantically Dale balanced himself on the palm of his left hand, extending his right arm upward, inching to the table-top. Then his fingers gripped the lid of the makeup kit, wrenching it down. With a rasp of rusty hinges the box slammed shut.

The mirror disappeared from view, but Dale's paralysis persisted. Try as he would, he couldn't raise himself. All he could do was wriggle, wriggle across the floor like a snake with a broken back, and lever his arms against the side of the bed. Pulling his body upward, he lifted himself, gasping with effort, then collapsed upon the cool sheets which dampened with the sweat of fear pouring from his fevered forehead.

*Fever.* That was the answer; it had to be. The doctor was wrong in his diagnosis. Dale was coming down with something, something that twisted mind and body. Labeling it psychosomatic brought no relief.

Dale rolled over to face the telephone resting on the nightstand beside the bed. If he could reach it he could call the paramedics. But as his hand moved forward he felt a sudden tingling in his legs, then kicked out with both feet. The paralysis, real or imaginary, was gone.

No reason to summon paramedics now, but he still needed help. In the dim light cast by the flash-lantern standing on the table across the room he dialed Dr. Pendleton's number. The ringing on the line gave way to the mechanical message of an answering-service.

"Dr. Pendleton is not in. Please leave your name and number and he will get back to you—"

Dale cradled the receiver, frowning in frustration. Sure, the doctor would get back to him, perhaps in an hour, maybe two or three. And then what?

How could he explain all this? If he minimized his condition he'd get that take-two-aspirins-and-call-me-in-the-morning routine. And if he came on too strong the doctor would probably order up an ambulance on his own. Pendleton was a practitioner of modern medicine; he wouldn't come out in the storm to make a house-call merely to humor a hysterical patient with his presence.

But Dale had to have someone's presence here, someone to talk to, someone like—

"Debbie?"

He'd dialled her number automatically and now the very sound of her voice brought relief.

"Dale! I was hoping you'd call."

Then she *did* care. Thank God for that! He listened intently as the warmth of her response gave way to concern.

"What's wrong? Are you sick or something?"

"Something," Dale said. "That is, I'm not sure. No, I can't explain it on the phone. If you could just come over—"

"Tonight? In all this rain?"

"Debbie, please. I know it's asking a lot, but I need you. I need you now—"

"And I need you." Debbie sighed. "All right. Give me half an hour."

The phone went dead, but as he replaced the receiver Dale came alive again. She was coming and he'd told the truth; he did need her, needed her desperately.

Listening, he realized the rain was slowing. It was a good sign. Perhaps by the time she arrived the storm would be over and they could talk without the punctuation of thunder. He'd tell her what had happened, make her understand.

But just what *had* happened—and why?

Dale rolled over on his back, staring at the shadows on the ceiling, facing up to the shadows surrounding the question in his own mind.

And the answer came.

He'd found it today at the Academy, found it when he read the actress's description of Bela Lugosi preparing for his portrayal.

"He psyched himself up." That was her explanation of how Lugosi became Dracula, and that was what Lon Chaney must have done.

No wonder he'd established a secret hideaway! Here, in this very room, he did more than experiment with physical disguise. Dale pictured him sitting alone on a night like this, creating contrivances to deform his body, refashioning his face, staring into the mirror at the creature reflected there. And then, the final transformation.

"Make up your mind." A figure of speech, but Chaney had given it a literal application, one beyond the mere application of makeup from his kit. Seated here in the shadowed silence, this man of mystery—this son of deaf-mute parents whom he communicated with through the power of pantomime—confronted the



reflections of monsters in the mirror and whispered the words. "I am the Frog. I am Blizzard. I am Dr. Ziska, Sergei, Alonzo the Armless, the Blackbird, Mr. Wu." Each time a different incarnation, each time a new *persona*, each time a litany repeated hour after hour from midnight to dawn, willing himself into the role until the role became reality.

And psyching himself up, he'd psyched-up the mirror too. The intensity of total concentration had been captured in the glass forever, just as it was later captured on the blank surface of nitrate film used for silent pictures. The filmed images decayed in time but the makeup kit mirror preserved Chaney's psychic power forever—a long-latent power revived by Dale's own glimpses into the glass, a power that grew greater with each succeeding gaze.

Dale remembered the first apparitions—how fleetingly they appeared and how little effect they had beyond the initial shock of recognition. It was his repeated viewing which gave strength to the shifting shapes until they transformed his body into a semblance of what he saw.

But he wouldn't repeat the mistake. From now on the makeup kit would remain closed and he'd never look into that mirror again.

The rain had ended now and so had his fear. Thunder and lightning gave way to a calm matching his own. Knowing the truth was enough; he wouldn't repeat all this to Debbie or try to convince her. Instead he'd just tell how much he needed her, and that was true too.

But first he must dispose of the kit.

Dale shifted himself over to the side of the bed, sitting up and swinging his feet to the floor. The power-outage hadn't ended; he'd shut the kit away in the closet, then take the flash-lantern with him and guide Debbie up the path when she arrived.

All was quiet as he crossed the room to the table where the lantern-light shone on the closed box beside it. That's what the kit was, really; just a battered old box. Lon Chaney's box—Pandora's box, which opened for evils to emerge. But not to worry; the lid was down and it would stay down forever.

His hand went to the flash-lantern.

At least that was his intention, until he felt the chill of cold metal at his fingertips and found them fixed upon the lid of the makeup kit.

He tried to pull away but his hand remained fixed, fixed by

a force commanding his movement and his mind, a power he could not control.

It was the power that raised the lid of the box, a power that seethed and surged, and in the uptilted mirror he saw its source.

Two eyes blazed from a face surmounted by a beaver hat and framed by matted hair; a face that grinned to display the cruel, serrated teeth. But it was from the cruel eyes that the power poured—the burning eyes of the vampire in *London After Midnight*. Dale knew the film, though he'd never seen a print; knew its original title was *The Hypnotist*. And it was a hypnotist who glared up at him, a hypnotist's power which had compelled him to open the box and stand transfixed now by the vision in the glass.

Then suddenly the face was fading and for a moment Dale felt a glimmer of hope. But as the face disappeared into the mirror's distorted depths, another face took form.

It was a face Dale knew only too well, one which had lain buried in his brain since childhood when he'd first seen it fill the screen from behind a ripped-away mask. The face of madness, the face of Death incarnate, the face of Chaney's supreme horror; the face of Erik in *The Phantom of the Opera*.

No wonder he'd blotted out all memory of the terror which tormented his nightmares as a child, the terror he'd hidden away in adulthood but which still survived in his unconscious. It was suppressed fear that lay behind his inexplicable interest in Lon Chaney, a fright disguised as fascination which guided him to this ultimate, inevitable confrontation with the gaping fangs, the flaring nostrils, the bulging eyes of a living skull.

The Phantom stared and Dale felt the flooding force of the death's-head's overwhelming power, to which he responded with a power of his own, born of utter dread.

For an instant, for an eternity, his gaze locked with that of the monster and he realized a final fear. The face was looming larger, moving forward—attempting to emerge from the mirror!

And then, with savage strength, Dale gripped the box in both hands, raising it high; panting, he dashed it down upon the floor. The makeup kit landed with a crash as the Phantom's image shattered into shards of splintered glass glinting up in the lantern-light.

Chaney's power was broken at last, and with it the power of the Phantom. Dale gasped, shuddering in relief as he felt full control return.

As the knocking sounded its summons he picked up the flash-lantern and carried it with him down the hall to the front door. Debbie was here now, his hope, his angel of salvation. And he went to her proudly and unafraid because he was free of Chaney, free of the mirror's magic, free of the Phantom forever. This was the beginning of a new life, a life of love and beauty.

Dale opened the door and saw her standing there, smiling up at him. It was only when he lifted the lantern and Debbie saw his face that she began to scream.

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# Does It *Ploop*?

by A. R. MORLAN

Nosy neighbors!

Some days a girl can't even perform a simple decapitation without some creep trying to peek in through the blinds. . . .!

Once it was all over, I thought that I'd wiped up all the blood, but damn it, there's another spray of it. Across the ceiling, natch, above and a little left of the top of the china cabinet. Not that it was such a brilliant thing to do the actual killing in the dining room, but when a couple of hundred bucks is at stake, and time is short, I'm not inclined to be all that methodical.

Or neat, unfortunately, although I don't suppose hacking off a live head with a hatchet qualified for a single-paper-towel clean-up. As it was I used up nearly a whole box of Spic and Span dissolved in one of those "one liquid gallon, one liquid quart" ice cream pails (it really pays to save them) and a jumbo roll of paper towels, and that didn't count the time I spent re-polishing the furniture after it dried off. Then there were the feathers, but I vacuum every day anyway—with two long-haired dogs it's a must—so I can't really bitch about *that*, but the damp carpet made the inside of my Hoover upright sticky, which meant having to take the blow drier to it, then scraping out the gummy residue of feathers, semi-moist Spic and Span, and residual blood with a putty knife, breaking two fingernails in the process.

(I swear, there is someone Up There looking down at me who has decreed, "Thou Shalt Not Have Ten Long Fingernails at the Same Time," like it's a spare commandment with my name on it.)

Anyhow—there it is, a burst of stale brown splatters,

something like the tail of a descending comet. I never imagined that a chicken could have so much blood in it. I mean, really, it's only a little bit bigger than a *football*, but I suppose the severed arteries did the trick. Of course, not being able to catch it right away added to the problem; if old Dead Fred from next door hadn't of picked *that moment* to start buzzing on the doorbell, just to ask if I'd mind if he trimmed the pine branches from *my* tree which hung over onto *his* lawn (the emphasis is eternally *his*), when he knew and I know that 99½% of the time he lops the tips off those branches anytime he gets a yen to do so (as in often), whether I've given my permission or not.

I think he saw me carry in the chicken, and wanted to stick his two cents worth into the situation. Maybe he was hoping I'd let him kill it for me, just like the way he manages to materialize out of the ozone every time I start to do lawn work, plying me with wheedled questions and orders: *Sure you don't want to use my power mower? Do you really want to plant that there? You wouldn't have to cut your grass so often if you cut it short like mine. Can I trim your bush?* (And yes, he manages to make the last query *most* unbotanical.)

Not that I actually have to worry about Dead Fred Ferger jumping me while I'm bending down to pull a locust branch out of my hand-mower blades; he's so wheezy and bandy-shanked, besides being sixty-some, that a toddler in loaded Pampers could outrun him, let alone a woman my age, which is young enough to be his granddaughter. (And my paternal Gramps Winston, who grew up and schooled with Deadie Freddie, says that old D. F. wouldn't know "where to stick it even if he found it.")

It's just that I've never liked a guy, any guy, any age, whose eyes won't go up any higher than where I cross my heart when he talks to me. And besides that, old Fred thinks he's such a big shit in Ewerton, maybe even in the whole county of Dean, and no doubt the entire state of Wisconsin, just because he's been to Europe, Asia, and Down Under, since half the population thinks it's a big deal to bop on up to Canada for a weekend, and the rest of Ewerton thinks it's a bigger deal to drive three miles out of the city to the bowling alley-cum-pizzeria-cum-video arcade and video-tape rental place near the gravel pit.

And naturally, Dead Fred de-emphasized the fact that his junkets were courtesy of Uncle Sam and the U.S. Marine Corps, since he was stationed in those places during WWII and Korea. No,

I don't know what war happened in Australia; maybe Sgt. Ferger versus the Kangaroos, or something equally earth-shaking. But to hear them tell it—and *tell* it, on to infinity—be it outside the Red Owl, inside the IGA, around the corner from the Coast to Coast, in the driveway in front of his house, or wherever he manages to trap some unsuspecting pair of ears; according to D. F. Ferger, War Hero, you just forget about John Wayne winning every war ever fought single-handedly (*nobody* could've fixed the Alamo), because, dear sir or madam, it was none other than Sgt. Frederic Ferger who made the world, the country, and the city of Ewerton safe for democracy, free speech, and the unalienable right to surreptitiously hack away at thy neighbor's pine tree, Amen.

The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that he did see the chicken. Because the pillowcase I was carrying it in started to rip as I was getting out of the car, and no doubt he was in his living room, taking his usual peeks at me through his blinds. Dead Fred believes that I can't seem them move. Asshole. By the time I was on the porch, the bird's feet were out, so he had to have known.

Actually, I suppose it might have been easier to let him go ahead and do the actual beheading—did you realize that the eyes don't close right off? Not that I'm that fond of chickens, but . . . *ughhh*—since he's told me at least twenty times that he's dressed out everything from rabbits to a grizzly bear his father shot after it mauled some livestock back in the 1930s, I suppose killing a four-pound chicken would've been a cakewalk. No doubt he might have been neater than I was, but one thing would have been a given; he would keep blabbing so much that I never would of heard the *ploop*, which was the whole point of buying and killing the chicken in the first place. And asking him to kill the bird without talking during the act would definitely have aroused his curiosity (and Dead Fred is one being I don't want to arouse in any way, shape, or form), and the last thing I want him to know is that I'm a freelance writer. He would never be able to keep it under his baseball cap, and before long I'd be bugged with "Can you get me an autograph from Judith Krantz?" "Can you get me a discount on my *TV Guide* subscription?" (Not that I'd ever have a serious audience for what I write out here in semi-Bible Belt land, where horror and fantasy stuff gathers dust on the shelves until they send in the front covers for credit and throw the books in the dumpster behind the stores. And as for magazines, the hot

sellers are *True Confessions*, check-out rags, and *Outdoor Life*. No magazine I've contributed to has every turned up in the IGA or the drug store here.)

Frankly, I'm not into being conspicuous about my writing; I like my "bread-and-butter-and-Alpo" job at the office in the paper mill, which is dull enough to let me think up stories while I work. Sort of like overtime on regular hours. And for the actual time spent *writing*, my daydreaming makes me more money than my bookkeeping skills do. Imagine, getting anywhere from five to five hundred dollars a throw (depending on the market) for a few hours of typing, a handful of bond paper, and a little postage. And imagination, of course. Actually, a lot of imagination, except for times like last month, when I had to buy that chicken from the Mennonite farmer down country road QV, which led me to muck up my Hoover, and my nails.

My problem actually amounted to this: e.g. when I can't spell a word, I consult my dictionary, but when I don't know what chicken blood sounds like after the chicken's head is liberated from its shoulders, there isn't a single book on the shelf that can help me. Not that I had ever anticipated needing any help in the imagination department; when I decided to give freelancing a try a couple of years ago, armed with my trusty Royal, Webster's, Roget's, Liquid Paper, and stack of bond paper bought during the "Back to School Daze" sale at Red Owl, and a little of the aforementioned imagination, I figured that I could rely on my mind to supply me with the answers to such pressing problems as, "What does a Mud Creature eat for breakfast?" or "Are vampires able to cast a reflection in a plexiglass window?"

Up to that point, I was "cooking with gas," as Gramps Winston used to put it, and after a scant dozen or so rejections, I was getting contributor's copies, checks, and contracts and even phone calls from the prozines, with the editors asking if this title change was okay, or if I could elaborate on this or that passage, or supply an alternate ending . . . little things that I could easily handle after a few hours of thought, maybe a night's sleep to supply a good, usable dream or two, nothing critical, and certainly nothing I needed to actually act out—until I got the call from the East Coast office of *Bloodbath Quarterly*, which threw me for a loop. The editor had said:

" . . . really loved that story you sent in with the other proofs, but I'll pass it back to you, 'cause I'm not sure how the readers

would respond to the part about the Forbidden Name of the Soulless One being spelled out in the—lemme find the page here, ah, got it—"gentle *ploops* of crimson blood flowing from the neck of the Golden Sacrificial Pheasant fell to the unholy ground below, slowly spelling out before the awed searchers the name of—" see, what I'm concerned about is that someone who knows a little bit about killing fowl like that might rip the story apart because of that passage. Being a city brat myself, I've never killed anything but a model airplane, so I . . . lemme take a different tack here, what I'm really wondering about is, the blood, as in does it *ploop* out or does it do something different? Maybe when you get the story back you can rethink the passage and then let me take another look at it, 'cause like I said, I really—"

Five minutes after I hung up the phone, I was in the car, headed for the farming part of town. I ran my story about having a boyfriend who really liked *fresh* chicken for dinner through a couple of times before reaching the farm, while visions of three-hundred-dollar checks danced in my head. To be honest, I felt kind of bad about planning to lie to a Mennonite, because all the ones I knew in town were really nice folks, and not pushy about their religion in public, but the farmer I spoke to, who was the uncle of a girl who worked with me in the office before she got married, didn't even ask me why I wanted a live chicken at 2:50 p.m. on a Friday, which really impressed me, so I added another dollar to the price of the bird, so he threw in an old pillowcase for free. The way I felt, if I didn't have to use the boyfriend excuse, I hadn't misled the fellow. (And even if I had used it, it wasn't a total lie, since my dogs Duke and Wolfie are boys, and they're just like friends, and they *love* chicken.)

So—there I was, on my way home with a flapping chicken in my car, which was soon carried into my usually clean house, and the boys were scratching at the inside of the bathroom door, whining to be let out, so after yelling at them to shaddup or no more Alpo, *ever*, I was holding the chicken by the feet, trying to open the door under the kitchen sink with my free hand, only the door sticks in warm weather, so I had to let go of the bird so I could rummage for the small hatchet I sometimes use to whack apart the big bones in the cheap cuts of meat I occasionally buy for Duke and Wolfie, which meant that the bird headed straight for the dining room, so I took advantage of the fact that the dogs had actually listened to me and shut up to grab the bird,





# BLOOD BATH



put it on the table and—it comes to me at this point that most people who have lived either on a farm or near one know what happened next, so I need not go into detail here save for the fact that the imitation wood-grain formica top on my dining room table did not withstand the hatchet chop very well at all, but the tablecloth does cover it—at that point I discovered that the blood coming from the Golden Sacrificial Pheasant's neck *would not go "ploop."* (When I rewrote the story, the Forbidden Name of the Soulless One was spelled out in the hot crimson calligraphy of spurting G.S.P.'s blood on the unholy walls of the Evil One's foul cave. That way the awed searchers didn't have to look down at the unholy and dirty floor.)

At that point in time, all I had to contend with was the Headless Chicken of Ewerton Hollow, which was doing its thing, much to my disgust, and to the delight of the boys, who smelled dinner, and began barking in anticipation—*and then the god-damned doorbell began to ring.* Since I happened to look like Sissy Spacek in *Carrie* after Nancy Allen and John Travolta did their thing up above the gym stage, I ended up wiping my face with wet paper towels from the kitchen before daring to open the door the slightest crack . . . which was enough to see good old Dead Fred's puffy baseball-capped bald head, full pink shiny lips working, endlessly working . . . I yelled, "Go on, do what you want, Mr. Ferger, I'm busy now," and slammed the door in his pasty face.

I had no idea what I'd said yes to until I saw him later on through my kitchen window, happily hacking away at my poor pine tree between sly peeks at my windows. By then I was plucking the bird, getting it ready for the pan, and the dogs' dinner that night, and I hated to stop what I was doing to go out there and chew him out, because if I did stop, I knew I wouldn't want to start up the job again. I hoped that Dead Fred would get his fingers caught in the blades of his clippers, the old fart. (By the way, I wasn't the one who started calling Dead Fred Dead Fred; folks around Ewerton started calling him that when he was a kid, on account of how he never tanned, no matter how long he stood around in the sun. Gramps said old D. F. always had the "ripe patina of an uncooked apple fritter.")

Long after Dead Fred packed the clippers in for the night, the boys ate roast chicken for dinner, and I started in cleaning, then typing into the night. Two weeks later, I received a check

from *Bloodbath Quarterly* for three hundred and fifty dollars.

After I cashed the check, I thought that that was the last of the Great Fowl Murder, but it all came back when I saw that blood up on the ceiling. And me out of Spic and Span. But according to this flyer from the IGA which came in the mail today, they've got it on sale, so I might as well buy a couple of boxes. I think that I may have some coupons for it in the kitchen drawer.

I was planning to get it tomorrow, but I think I'll make a run uptown today, since I'm almost out of typing paper, too. The editor from *Bloodbath Quarterly* called a couple of hours ago, about the novella I sent in, "They Came from the Woodpile." A sure six or seven hundred dollars I'd been hoping for.

"... really fantastic stuff here, except for this problem I have with—well, maybe it's just me, I don't know how you could check up on this, but what the hell, I'll run my feelings about this past you—it actually all holds together except for this part from pages ... lemme see here ... 43 to 51, where the Bark Creatures have Aunt Ina tied to that cord of wood, and the bigger Bark Creature has picked up her ax in its ... uh ... paws—"

Outside, I could see Dead Fred scooting around on his pratt next to my property line, picking out the creeping charlie weed coming from my lawn onto his, using his bare hands to rip the plants out by the roots. He doesn't realize that I won't put weed killer on the stuff because I am fully aware that the creeping charlie drives him nuts. Sort of tit for tat for my poor lopsided pine tree.

"—and then after they hack at her a few times, just before they garrote her with their ... um ... tentacles, she gives this great impassioned speech about Mankind's right to use the fruits of the land, even the trees, and what I was wondering about was this ... wouldn't all that hacking affect her ability to talk? Maybe it doesn't, but some med student might read it and—"

Dead Fred got up, dusted off his baggy chinos, and wandered over to the pine tree, near where the dogs were chained to the clothes pole, where he stood just out of their reach, barking at them. *Get 'um, boys*, I mouthed silently at the window.

"—and then fire off a letter about it to the 'Readers Rights' column, so I'll send this back so you can—"

Dead Fred can't understand how I manage the boys, tells me so at least ten times a week. "They must be bigger than you girlie, one of these days they'll break loose and raise hell in that nice

house of yours, just pin you down and eat 'cha up, just gobble you down like a sheep," he prattles at me, no doubt wishing he could join them if they ever did that. He's worse than a dog; at least they shut up sometimes.

"—get a revision back to me soon, 'cause this issue will be closing next month, oh, and another thing, does a severed head really keep on living and trying to talk after it's been . . . uh, severed? Seems like I heard a line in a movie or read someplace that it does, but I'm way behind on the slush, so maybe you could look —"

Good old D. F. was watching me through the window. I gave him a little wave, and the shameless old pervert had the nerve to wave right back. He ambled over to the rose bush, probably dreaming of trimming it. Funny, he probably knows my house inside out, from when the old owners used to have him coffee klatch over every day—a fact he wistfully reminds me of several times a week. I know he'd give what teeth he has left to come in, would even settle for a cup of pee for the chance to cross over my welcome mat.

"—so, I'm looking forward to seeing what you can come up with, and until then—"

Gee. Dear neighbor Fred really has been such a help, what with all those offers of his mower, and they way he prunes my shrubbery for me. Bet he would just love a nice hot cuppa java, as he calls it. Jeeze, I've got to get that ceiling cleaned up before he comes. Wouldn't want any aroused curiosity, or anything else. If I'd been thinking that day, I would have spread around some of those big black trash bags that I keep under the sink. Wouldn't have had to use so much—maybe I'll pick up three boxes of Spic and Span. Never hurts to have some extra around.

I think I will leave the dogs *out* of the bathroom this time.

# Two Poems

by BRUCE BOSTON

Each night the clock keeps ticking.  
She never winds it.

## The Contemporary Witch

She cultivates  
a garden of thorns,  
dons a necklace of bones  
fashioned from  
her lover's limpness.  
She sniffs coke in the afternoon  
and welcomes the evening  
with feverish incantations.

When he comes to call  
she unprepares herself:  
chews some garlic,  
musses her hair,  
hides all the best records  
at the back of the stack.  
Afterward she sighs,  
inconclusively.

She wants to sing,  
to dance, to sit naked  
in the library stacks,  
eating oranges.

•   •   •

Each night the clock keeps ticking.  
She never winds it.  
And in this empty house  
the stairs she cannot find.  
No one, no thing,  
will tell her where.  
Her cat. Her broom.  
Not even the wrinkled belly  
of the moon.

### Soul of a Victorian

Too late, you have signed the deed,  
when you hear a wailing in the cellar.  
You find her blind and stubborn  
as a root, naked, draped in old lace.

As you lift her through the trapdoor  
the wind begins to pierce the eaves,  
to fill the high and narrow rooms  
with the smell of wood's damp rot.

She tells of the graves in the yard:  
one cat, three dogs, a fetus.  
She speaks of an empty carriage,  
the rusty stain on the hall paper.

And while you are listening  
you taste the dead hours and grasp  
the worms' artless consumation:  
you feel time between your fingers.

She is slipping back from you,  
down to the dark lampshades,  
the chest with the broken hasp,  
to photographs of forgotten memory.

# Interview: Dean Koontz

by BILL MUNSTER

An interview  
with the author of *Strangers*.

Munster: You've written both science fiction and horror. Which do you prefer?

Koontz: I've not only written sf and horror but psychological suspense like *Shattered* and *Whispers*. But no matter what form I'm writing in, there's one constant in my books, which is that I love to scare the readers, grip them by the throat, make them sweat, make them beg for mercy. Must be the touch of the sadist in me!

Munster: Name some writers in the field you admire.

Koontz: Richard Matheson has done some fine work. *I Am Legend* is, to my mind, the second-best vampire story of all time, second only to *Dracula*. *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is a *tour-de-force*, and *Hell House* is dynamite. In his weird mood—as opposed to his sf mood—Theodore Sturgeon was unstoppable; I'm thinking of great stories like "It" and "The Professor's Teddy Bear" and *Some of Your Blood*, which is one of the scariest novels I've ever read. Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* is one of the few genuine classics of modern horror. A book that will live forever is Stephen King's *The Shining*. There are other King books of which I'm enormously fond—*Firestarter*, *The Dead Zone*, *Pet Sematary*, and to a lesser degree *Salem's Lot*. I think Paul Wilson is good, and I wish he'd write more than he does, and Charles Grant is always very stylish.

Munster: *What do you read for pleasure?*

Koontz: I read everything: John D. MacDonald is a great hero of mine, Elmore Leonard, Ross Thomas, and William Goldman. Scores of others, and about a hundred magazines ranging from science journals to *Fortune*, from *The National Review* on the right to *New Republic* on the left.

Munster: *How do you feel about the horror movies coming out today? What single recent film stands out as exceptional? What single film as dreadful?*

Koontz: The dreadful films are too numerous to mention. And they're so witless that it isn't even fun to ridicule them. I mean, they're such easy targets. As for the few good ones ... Well, I thought *The Dead Zone* was really tremendous. Low key, understand, but constantly tense and frequently ominous as hell. Christopher Walker made me believe he had the power. And Cronenberg's method of portraying psychic visions was unique and stylish. I liked *Poltergeist* for its humor, warm heart, and its message about the strength of the family unit. *Alien*, in spite of a sometimes dumb plot, reached right into the heart of all human fears and squeezed until it hurt.

Munster: *Peter Straub and Stephen King recently teamed up for The Talisman. Is there any author you'd like to team up with on a novel?*

Koontz: I think collaborations are seldom successful; collaborative books are usually less interesting than the books that the writers would have produced working alone. King and Straub may be an exception, but to be absolutely sure of that, I'd have to see another book or two by them. A definite exception to that rule is the work done by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle. If I were to be forced to work in collaboration very much, I would wind up as a headline in the *National Enquirer*: KOONTZ KILLS COLLABORATOR WITH CUISINART OVER DISPUTE ABOUT SEMICOLON. In my heart, I am still a little boy, writing stories on tablet paper, binding them with tape, and they're all mine, mine, mine.

Munster: *Your fiction seems to rely heavily on dialogue. Why's that?*

Koontz: Some of my books have a lot of dialogue, like *The Vision* and *The Face of Fear*. The story often demands the form, and I don't know until I'm into it whether it's going to be one that demands a lot of dialogue. I like dialogue because you can rapidly advance the plot, convey background, and reveal a tremendous



amount about the characters in a relatively subtle fashion.

Munster: *Do you find yourself listening in on conversations and then writing them down for later use?*

Koontz: I don't record bits of dialogue that I hear in real life, but I do listen to people, and I remember a lot of colorful or unusual things they say.

Munster: *What sort of hours do you keep? How much of your time is spent writing?*

Koontz: I start writing in the morning, around 9:00 and work until 6:00, although if things are going well I may continue until we have dinner at 7:30. There have been long stretches, months at a time, when I've worked seven days a week. Did I mention I'm driven? If I bother to eat lunch, which I usually don't, I always eat at my desk. Last year, for the first time, I tried writing with music and find that, on about half the days I work, I enjoy having it in the background. Rachmaninoff is great to write to, dramatic and emotional, Bach, a little Elton John, and a lot of Bruce Springsteen. I can write up a storm to the *Born in the USA* album.

Munster: *Have you ever suffered from writer's block?*

Koontz: Writer's block? What is that? Man, I'm driven. I am obsessed with telling stories. The hardest thing for me is to stop writing.

Munster: *How much research do you put into a story? Night Chills, for example, deals with subliminal manipulation, and you show an uncommon understanding of the subject.*

Koontz: *Night Chills* was a tough one. Gerda [Koontz's wife] spent weeks digging in libraries for the articles and books, then marked what she thought I must read and study. That reduced the work load for me, but I still spent hours becoming an "expert" on subliminal suggestion.

Munster: *Was there a dramatic moment in your life when you suddenly realized that you wanted to write?*

Koontz: From Day One, I seemed to know. I loved storybooks when I was a child and dreamed of one day making my own. My parents always thought books were a waste of time and money, and I was always in trouble for earning money for doing this and that and then spending half of it on books. I liked: Matheson, Lovecraft, Bram Stoker, every issue of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. In college I won an *Atlantic Monthly* fiction prize and sold my first story for fifty dollars.

Munster: *Your novel, Demon Seed, was made into a film in 1977.*

*Were you happy with the Jaffe and Hirson screenplay?*

Koontz: I was more happy than not with the film. The book is a lot more frightening, I think, but overall they did a first-rate job on a surprisingly modest budget and got twice the number of effects on the screen they could've been expected to produce for the money. The only thing I thought truly dumb about it (and I've told Robert Jaffe this), was when Proteus, the super-computer, suddenly develops an early-1970s liberal consciousness and starts talking about limitations, small-is-beautiful, that sort of thing. After all, for God's sake, this is supposed to be a demigod machine, an intelligence without limits, and it wouldn't be mouthing any dumb political pieties of either the left or right; it would be far beyond that.

*Munster: Video magazine (February 1985) felt Demon Seed "may be the most distasteful movie of the last twenty years. Apart from a plot that features authentic mechanical rape, it's based solely on physical torture, deformity, and subjugation." What's your reaction to all that?*

Koontz: My reaction is that Video magazine has a screw loose somewhere. The film—and the book—do not glorify torture and sexual subjugation. It's about the horror of same and about the capacity of the human spirit to endure and triumph over that sort of stuff.

*Munster: Land of Enchantment just published a special edition of your novel Twilight Eyes. Could you explain how that came about?*

Koontz: Chris Zavis, who is *Land of Enchantment*, came to me after he'd done *The Cycle of the Werewolf*, and said, "How about doing a story for me?" He said he wanted something longer than the King story, which was essentially a long short story or short novelette. Chris asked for a 25,000 word novella. I agreed and set to work. I ended up with 125,000 words, five times what he wanted! Poor Chris aged a year during the minute it took him to open the manuscript box, check the length, and calculate the horrendous run-up in publishing costs. Phil Parks spent a year doing the artwork, which is truly spectacular. Phil has done gorgeous work on this, and more than a few of his illustrations brought a chill of horror to me when I saw them.

# Snatcher

by DEAN R. KOONTZ

You probably couldn't find anyone lower, greasier, or more evil than Billy Neeks. Or anyone more deserving of a fate like this.

Billy Neeks had a flexible philosophy regarding property rights. He believed in the proletarian ideal of shared wealth—as long as the wealth belonged to someone else. If it was *his* property, Billy was ready to defend it to the death. It was a good, workable philosophy for a thief, which Billy was.

Billy Neeks's occupation was echoed by his grooming: he looked slippery. His thick black hair was slicked back with enough scented oil to fill a crankcase. His coarse skin was perpetually pinguid, as if he suffered continuously from malaria. He moved cat-quick on well-lubricated joints, and his hands had the buttery grace of a magician's hands. His eyes looked like twin pools of Texas crude, wet and black and deep—and utterly untouched by human warmth or feeling. If the route to Hell were an inclined ramp requiring some hideous grease to facilitate descent, Billy Neeks would be the devil's choice to pass eternity in the application of that noxious, oleaginous substance.

In action, Billy could bump into an unsuspecting woman, separate her from her purse, and be ten yards away and moving fast by the time she realized she had been victimized. Single-strap purses, double-strap purses, clutch purses, purses carried over the shoulder, purses carried in the hand—all meant easy money to Billy Neeks. Whether his target was cautious or careless was of no consequence. Virtually no precautions could foil him.

That Wednesday in April, pretending to be drunk, he jostled a well-dressed elderly woman on Broad Street, just past Bartram's Department Store. As she recoiled in disgust from that oily con-

tact, Billy slipped her purse off her shoulder, down her arm, and into the plastic shopping bag he carried. He had reeled away from her and had taken six or eight steps in an exaggerated stagger before she realized that the collision had not been as purposeless as it had seemed. Even as the victim shrieked "police," Billy had begun to run, and by the time she added, "help, police, help," Billy was nearly out of earshot.

He raced through a series of alleyways, dodged around garbage cans and dumpsters, leaped across the splayed legs of a sleeping wino. He sprinted across a parking lot, fled into another alley.

Blocks from Bartram's, Billy slowed to a walk, breathing only slightly harder than usual, grinning. When he stepped out onto 46th Street, he saw a young mother carrying a baby and a shopping bag *and* a purse, and she looked so defenseless that Billy could not resist the opportunity, so he flicked open his switchblade and, in a wink, cut the straps on her bag, a stylish blue leather number. Then he dashed off again, across the street, where drivers braked sharply and blew their horns at him, into another network of alleys, all familiar to him, and as he ran he giggled. His giggle was neither shrill nor engaging but more like the sound of ointment squirting from a tube.

When he slid on spilled garbage—orange peels, rotting lettuce, mounds of molding and soggy bread—he was not tripped up or even slowed down. The disgusting spill seemed to facilitate his flight, and he came out of the slide moving faster than he had gone into it.

He slowed to a normal pace when he reached Prospect Boulevard. The switchblade was in his pocket again. Both stolen purses were concealed in the plastic shopping bag. He projected what he thought was an air of nonchalance, and although his calculated expression of innocence was actually a dismal failure, it was the best he could do.

He walked to his car, which he had parked at a meter along Prospect. The Pontiac, unwashed for at least two years, left oil drippings wherever it went, just as a wolf in the wilds marked its territory with dribbles of urine. Billy put the stolen purses in the trunk of the car and drove away from that part of the city, toward other prowling grounds in other neighborhoods.

Of the several reasons for his success as a purse snatcher, mobility was perhaps most important. Many snatchers were kids looking for a few fast bucks, young hoods without wheels, but

Billy Neeks was twenty-five, no kid, and possessed of reliable transportation. He usually robbed two or three women in one neighborhood and then quickly moved on to another territory, where no one was looking for him and where more business waited to be done.

To him, this was not small-time thievery committed either by impulse or out of desperation. Instead, Billy saw it as a business, and he was a businessman, and like other businessmen he planned his work carefully, weighed the risks and benefits of any endeavor, and acted only as a result of careful, responsible analysis.

Other snatchers—amateurs and punks, every one of them—paused on the street or in an alleyway, hastily searching purses for valuables, risking arrest by their inadvisable delays, at the very least creating a host of additional witnesses to their crimes. Billy, on the other hand, stashed the purses in the trunk of his car to be retrieved later for more leisurely inspection in the privacy of his home.

He prided himself on his methodicalness and caution.

That cloudy and humid Wednesday in late April, he crossed and re-crossed the city, briefly visiting three widely separated districts and snatching six purses in addition to those he had taken from the elderly woman outside Bertram's and from the young mother on 46th Street. The last of the eight also came from an old woman, and at first he thought it was going to be an easy hit, and then he thought it was going to get messy, and finally it just turned out weird.

When Billy spotted her, she was coming out of a butcher's shop on Westend Avenue, clutching a package of meat to her breast. She was *old*. Her brittle white hair stirred in the spring breeze, and Billy had the curious notion that he could hear those dry hairs rustling against one another. A crumpled-parchment face, slumped shoulders, pale withered hands, and shuffling step combined to convey the impression not only of extreme age but of frailty and vulnerability, which was what drew Billy Neeks as if he were an iron filing and she a magnet. Her purse was big, almost a satchel, and the weight of it—in addition to the package of meat—seemed to bother her, for she was shrugging the straps farther up on her shoulder and wincing in pain, as if suffering from a flare-up of arthritis.

Though it was spring, she was dressed in black: black shoes, black stockings, black skirt, dark grey blouse, even a heavy black

Cardigan sweater unsuited to the mild day.

Billy looked up and down the street, saw no one else nearby, and quickly made his move. He did his drunk trick, staggering, jostling the old biddy. But as he pulled the purse down her arm, she dropped the package of meat, seized the bag with both hands, and for a moment they were locked in an unexpectedly fierce struggle. Ancient as she was, she possessed surprising strength. He tugged at the purse, wrenched and twisted it, desperately attempted to rock her backward off her feet, but she stood her ground and held on with the tenacity of a deeply rooted tree resisting a storm wind.

He said, "Give it up, you old bitch, or I'll bust your face."

And then a strange thing happened:

She seemed to *change* before Billy's eyes. In a blink, she no longer appeared frail but steely, no longer weak but darkly energized. Her bony and arthritic hands suddenly looked like the dangerous talons of a powerful bird of prey. That singular face—pale yet jaundiced, nearly fleshless, all wrinkles and sharp pointy lines—was still ancient, but it no longer seemed quite *human* to Billy Neeks. And her eyes. My God, her eyes. At first glance, Billy saw only the watery, myopic gaze of a doddering crone, but abruptly they were eyes of tremendous power, eyes of fire and ice, simultaneously boiling his blood and freezing his heart, eyes that saw into him and through him, not the eyes of a helpless old woman but those of a murderous beast that had the desire and ability to devour him alive.

He gasped in fear, and he almost let go of the purse, almost ran, but in another blink she was transformed into a defenseless old woman again, and abruptly she capitulated. Like pop-beads, the swollen knuckles of her twisted hands seemed to come apart, and her finger joints went slack. She lost her grip, releasing the purse with a small cry of despair.

Emitting a menacing snarl that served not only to frighten the old woman but to chase away Billy's own irrational terror, he shoved her backward, into a curbside trash container, and bolted past her, the satchel-size purse under his arm. He glanced back after several steps, half-expecting to see that she had fully assumed the form of a great dark bird of prey, flying at him, eyes aflame, teeth bared, talon-hands spread and hooked to tear him to bits. But she was clutching at the trash container to keep her balance, as age-broken and helpless as she had been when he had first seen

The only odd thing: she was looking after him with a smile. No mistaking it. A wide, stained-tooth smile. Almost a lunatic grin.

Senile old fool, Billy thought. Had to be senile if she found anything funny about having her purse snatched.

He could not imagine why he had ever been afraid of her.

He ran, dodging from one alleyway to another, down side-streets, across a sun-splashed parking lot, and along a shadowy service passage between two tenements, onto a street far removed from the scene of his latest theft. At a stroll, he returned to his parked car and put the old woman's black purse and one other in the trunk with the six taken elsewhere in the city. At last, a hard day's work behind him, he drove home, looking forward to counting his take, having a few beers, and watching some tv.

Once, stopped at a red traffic light, Billy thought he heard something moving in the car's trunk. There were a few hollow thumps and a brief but curious scraping noise. However, when he cocked his head and listened closer, he hear nothing more, and he decided that the noise had only been the pile of stolen purses shifting under their own weight.

Billy Neeks lived in a ramshackle four-room bungalow between a vacant lot and a transmission shop, two blocks from the river. The place had belonged to his mother and had been clean and in good repair when she had lived there. Two years ago, Billy had convinced her to transfer ownership to him "for tax reasons," then had shipped her off to a nursing home to be cared for at the expense of the state. He supposed she was still there; he didn't know for sure because he never visited.

That evening in April, Billy arranged the eight purses side by side in two rows on the kitchen table and stared at them for a while in sweet anticipation of the treasure hunt to come. He popped the tab on a Budweiser. He tore open a bag of Doritos. He pulled up a chair, sat down, and sighed contentedly.

Finally, he opened the purse he had taken off the woman outside Bartram's, and began to calculate his "earnings." She had looked well-to-do, and the contents of her wallet did not disappoint Billy Neeks: \$309 in folding money, plus another \$4.10 in change. She also carried a stack of credit cards, which Billy would fence through Jake Barcelli, the pawn-shop owner who would also give him a few bucks for the other worthwhile items he found

in the purses. In the first bag, those fenceable items included a gold-plated Tiffany pen, matching gold-plated Tiffany compact and lipstick tube, and a fine though not extraordinarily expensive opal ring.

The young mother's purse contained only \$11.42 and nothing else of value, which Billy had expected, but that meager profit did not diminish the thrill he got from going through the contents of the bag. He looked upon snatching as a business, yes, and thought of himself as a businessman, but he also took considerable pleasure simply from perusing and *touching* his victims' belongings. The violation of a woman's personal property was a violation of her, too, and when his quick hands explored the young mother's purse, it was almost as if he were exploring her body. Sometimes, Billy took unfenceable items—cheap compacts, inexpensive tubes of lipstick, eyeglasses—and put them on the floor and stomped them, because crushing them beneath his heel was somehow almost like crushing the woman herself. Easy money made his work worthwhile, but he was equally motivated by the tremendous sense of power he got from the job; it stimulated him, it really did, stimulated and satisfied.

By the time he went slowly through seven of the eight purses, savoring their contents, it was 7:15 in the evening, and he was euphoric. He breathed fast and, occasionally, shuddered ecstatically. His oily hair looked oilier than usual, for it was damp with sweat and hung in clumps and tangles. Fine beads of perspiration glimmered on his face. During his exploration of the purses, he had knocked the open bag of Doritos off the kitchen table but had not noticed. He had opened a second beer, but he never tasted it; now it stood forgotten. His world had shrunk to the dimensions of a woman's purse.

He had saved the crazy old woman's bag for last because he had a hunch that it was going to provide the greatest treasure of the day.

The old hag's purse was big, almost a satchel, made of supple black leather, with long straps, and with a single main compartment that closed with a zipper. He pulled it in front of him and stared at it for a moment, letting his anticipation build.

He remembered how the crone had resisted him, holding fast to the bag until he thought he might have to flick open his switchblade and cut her. He had cut a few women before, not many but enough to know he *liked* cutting them.



That was the problem. Billy was smart enough to realize that, liking knifeplay so much, he must deny himself the pleasure of cutting people, resorting to violence only when absolutely necessary, for if he used the knife too often, he would be unable to stop using it, would be compelled to use it, and then he would be lost. The police expended no energy in the search for mere purse snatchers, but they would be a lot more aggressive and relentless in pursuit of a slasher.

Still, he had not cut anyone for several months, and by such admirable self-control, he had earned the right to have some fun. He would have taken great pleasure in separating the old woman's withered meat from her bones. And now he wondered why he had not ripped her up the moment she had given him trouble.

He had virtually forgotten how she had briefly terrified him, how she had looked less human than avian, how her hands had seemed to metamorphose into wicked talons, and how her eyes had blazed. Deeply confirmed in his macho self-image, he had no capacity for any memory that had the potential for humiliation.

With a growing certainty that he was about to find a surprising treasure, he put his hands on the purse and lightly squeezed. It was crammed full, straining at the seams, and Billy told himself that the forms he felt through the leather were wads of money, banded stacks of hundred-dollar bills, and his heart began to thump with excitement.

He pulled open the zipper, looked in, and frowned.

It was dark inside the purse.

Billy peered closer.

Impossibly dark.

Squinting, he could see nothing in there at all, not a wallet or a compact or a comb or a packet of Kleenex, not even the lining of the purse itself, only a flawless and very deep darkness, as if he were peering into a well. *Deep* was the word, all right, for he had a sense that he was staring down into unplumbable and mysterious depths, as if the bottom of the purse were not just a few inches away but thousands of feet down—even farther—countless miles below him. Suddenly he realized that the glow from the overhead kitchen fluorescents fell into the open purse but illuminated nothing; the bag seemed to swallow every ray of light and digest it.

Billy Neeks's warm sweat of quasi-erotic pleasure abruptly turned icy-cold, and his skin dimpled with gooseflesh. He knew

he should pull the zipper shut, cautiously carry the purse blocks away from his own house, and dispose of it in someone else's trash bin. But he saw his right hand slipping toward the gaping maw of the bag. When he tried to pull it back, he could not, as if it were a stranger's hand over which he had no control. His fingers disappeared into the darkness, and the rest of the hand followed. He shook his head—no, no, no—but still he could not stop himself, he was *compelled* to reach into the bag, and now his hand was in to the wrist, and he felt nothing in there, nothing but a terrible cold that made his teeth chatter, and still he reached in, down, until his arm was shoved all the way in to the elbow, and he should have felt the bottom of the purse long before that, but there was just a vast emptiness in there, so he reached down farther, until he was in almost to his shoulder, feeling around with splayed fingers, searching in that impossible void for something, anything.

That was when something found *him*.

Down deep in the bag, something brushed his hand.

Billy jerked in surprise.

Something bit him.

Billy screamed and finally found the will to resist the siren call of the darkness within the purse. He tore his hand out, leaped to his feet, knocking over his chair. He stared in terror at the bloody punctures on the meaty portion of his palm. Tooth marks. Five small holes, neat and round, welling blood.

He stood for a moment, numb with shock, then let out a wail and grabbed for the zipper on the bag to close it. Even as Billy's blood-slick fingers touched the pull-tab, the creature came out of the bag, up from a lightless place, and Billy snatched his hand back in terror.

It was a small beast, only about a foot tall, not too big to crawl out through the open mouth of the purse. It was gnarly and dark, like a man in form—two arms, two legs—but not like a man in any other way at all. If its tissues had not once been inanimate lumps of stinking sewage, then they had been some sludge of mysterious though equally noxious origins. Its muscles and sinews appeared to be formed from human waste, all tangled up with human hair and decaying human entrails and desiccated human veins. Its feet were twice as large as they should have been and terminated in razor-edged black claws that put as much fear into Billy Neeks as his own switchblade had put into others. A

hooked and pointed spur curved up from the back of each heel. The arms were proportionately as long as those of an ape, with six or maybe seven fingers—Billy could not be sure how many because the thing kept working its hands ceaselessly as it crawled out of the purse and stood up on the table—and each finger ended in an ebony claw.

As the creature rose to its feet and emitted a fierce hiss, Billy stumbled backward until he came up against the refrigerator. Over the sink was a window, locked and covered with filthy curtains. The door to the dining room was on the other side of the kitchen table. To get to the door that opened onto the back porch, he would have to go past the table. He was effectively trapped.

The thing's head was asymmetrical, lumpy, pocked, as if crudely modeled by a sculptor with an imperfect sense of human form, modeled in sewage and scraps of rotten tissue as was its body. A pair of eyes were set high on that portion of the face that would have been the forehead, with a second pair below them. Two more eyes, making six in all, were located at the sides of the skull, where ears should have been, and all of these organs of vision were entirely white, without iris or pupil, so you might have thought the beast was blinded by cataracts, though it was not. It could see; most definitely, it could see, for it was looking straight at Billy.

The thing reeked—a stench reminiscent of rotten eggs.

Trembling violently, making strangled sounds of fear, Billy reached to one side with his bitten right hand, pulled open a drawer in the cabinet next to the refrigerator. Never taking his eyes off the thing that had come out of the purse, he fumbled for the knives he knew were there, found them, and extracted the butcher's knife.

On the table, the six-eyed denizen of a nightmare opened its ragged mouth, revealing rows of pointed yellow teeth. It hissed again and, to Billy's astonishment, it spoke in a thin, whispery voice that managed to be simultaneously soft yet shrill yet gravelly: *"Billy? Billy Neeks?"*

"Oh, my God," Billy said.

*"Is that you, Billy?"* the beast inquired.

I'm dreaming this, Billy thought.

*"No dream,"* the beast whispered.

It's from Hell (Billy thought), a demon straight up from Hell.

*"Give the man a big cigar."*

Twisting its deformed mouth into what might have been a grin, the demon kicked the open can of beer off the table and let out a hideous dry sound halfway between a snarl and a giggle.

Suddenly lunging forward and swinging the big butcher knife as if it were a mighty Samurai sword, Billy took a whack at the creature, intending to lop off its head or chop it in half. The blade connected with its disgusting flesh, sank less than an inch into its darkly glistening torso, above its knobby hips, but would not go any deeper, certainly not all the way through. Billy felt as if he had taken a hack at a slab of steel, for the aborted power of the blow coursed back through the handle of the knife and shivered painfully through his hands and arms like the vibrations that would have rebounded upon him if he had grabbed a crowbar and, with all his strength, slammed it into a solid iron post.

In that same instant, one of the creature's hands moved flash-quick, slashed Billy, revealing two of his knuckle bones.

With a cry of surprise and pain, Billy let go of the weapon. He staggered back against the refrigerator, holding his gouged hand.

The creature on the table stood unfazed, the knife embedded in its side, neither bleeding nor exhibiting any signs of pain. With its small black gnarled hands, the beast gripped the handle and pulled the sharp instrument from its own flesh. Turning all six scintillant, milky eyes on Billy, it raised the knife, which was nearly as big as the beast itself, and snapped it in two, throwing the blade in one direction and the handle in another.

*"Come to get you, Billy,"* it said.

Billy ran.

He had to go around the table, past the creature, too close, but he did not care, did not hesitate, because his only alternative was to stand at the refrigerator and be torn to bits. Dashing out of the kitchen into the bungalow's little dining room, he heard a thump behind him as the demon leaped off the table. Worse: he heard the *clack-tick-clack* of its chitinous feet and horny claws as it scrambled across the linoleum, hurrying after him.

As a purse snatcher, Billy had to keep in shape and had to be able to run deer-fast. Now, his conditioning was the only advantage he had.

Was it possible to outrun the devil?

He bounded out of the dining room, jumped across a footstool in the living room, and fled toward the front door. His

bungalow was somewhat isolated, between an empty lot and a transmission repair shop that was closed at this hour of the evening. However, there were a couple of small houses across the street and, at the corner, a 7-Eleven Market that was usually busy, and he figured he would be safe if he could join up with other people, even strangers. He sensed that the demon would not want to be seen by anyone else.

Expecting the beast to leap on him and sink its teeth into his neck at any moment, Billy tore open the front door and almost plunged out of the house—then stopped abruptly when he saw what lay outside. Nothing. No front walk. No lawn, no trees. No street. No other houses across the way, no 7-Eleven on the corner. Nothing, nothing. No light whatsoever. The night beyond the house was unnaturally dark, as utterly lightless as the bottom of a mine shaft—or as the inside of the old woman's purse from which the beast had clambered. Although it should have been a warm late-April evening, the velvet-black night was icy, bone-numbingly cold, just as the inside of the big black leather purse had been.

Billy stood on the threshold, swaying, breathless, with his heart trying to jackhammer its way out of his chest, and he was seized by the mad idea that his entire bungalow was now *inside* the crazy old woman's purse. Which made no sense. The bottomless purse was back there in the kitchen, on the table. The purse could not be inside the house at the same time that the house was inside the purse. Could it?

He felt dizzy, confused, nauseous.

He had always known everything worth knowing. Or thought he did. Now he knew better.

He did not dare venture out of the bungalow, into the unrelenting blackness. He sensed no haven within that coally gloom. And he knew instinctively that, if he took one step into the frigid darkness, he would not be able to turn back. One step, and he would fall into the same terrible void that he had felt within the hag's purse: down, down, forever down.

The stench of rotten eggs grew overwhelming.

The beast was behind him.

Whimpering wordlessly, Billy Neeks turned from the horrifying emptiness beyond his house, looked back into the living room, where the demon was waiting for him, and cried out when he saw that it had grown bigger than it had been a moment ago.

Much bigger. Three feet tall instead of one. Broader in the shoulders. More muscular arms. Thicker legs. Bigger hands and longer claws. The repulsive creature was not as close as he had expected, not on top of him, but standing in the middle of the living room, watching him, grinning, taunting him merely by choosing not to end the confrontation quickly.

The disparity between the warm air in the house and the freezing air outside seemed to cause a draft that sucked at the door, pulling it shut behind Billy. It closed with a bang.

Hissing, the demon took a step forward. When it moved, Billy could hear its gnarly skeleton and oozing flesh work one against the other like the parts of a grease-clogged machine in ill repair.

He backed away from it, heading around the room toward the short hall that led to the bedroom.

The repugnant apparition followed, casting a hellish shadow that seemed somehow even more grotesque than it should have been, as if the shadow were thrown not by the monster's malformed body but by its more hideously malformed soul. Perhaps aware that its shadow was wrong, perhaps unwilling to consider the meaning of its shadow, the beast purposefully knocked over a floorlamp as it stalked Billy, and in the influx of shadows, it proceeded more confidently and more eagerly, as if shadows eased its way.

At the entrance to the hallway, Billy stopped edging sideways, bolted flat-out for his bedroom, reached it, and slammed the door behind him. He twisted the latch with no illusions of having found sanctuary. The creature would smash through that flimsy barrier with no difficulty. Billy only hoped to reach the nightstand drawer, where he kept a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum, and indeed he got it with plenty of time to spare.

The gun seemed considerably smaller than he remembered it. Too small. He told himself it seemed inadequate only because the enemy was so formidable. He told himself the weapon would prove plenty big enough when he pulled the trigger. But it still seemed small. Virtually a toy.

With the loaded .357 held in both hands and aimed at the door, he wondered if he should fire through the barrier or wait until the beast burst inside.

The demon resolved the issue by *exploding* through the locked door in a shower of wooden shards, splinters, and mangled hinges.

It was bigger still, more than six feet tall, bigger than Billy,



a gigantic and loathesome creature that, more than ever, appeared to be constructed of feces, wads of mucous, tendons of tangled hair, fungus, and the putrescent bits and pieces of several cadavers. Redolent of rotten eggs, with its multiplicitous white eyes now as radiant as incandescent bulbs, it lurched inexorably toward Billy, not even hesitating when he pulled the trigger of the .357 and pumped six rounds into it.

What had that old crone been, for God's sake? No ordinary senior citizen paying a visit to her butcher's shop. No way. What kind of woman carried such a strange purse and kept such a thing as this at her command? A witch? A witch? Of course, a witch.

At last, backed into a corner, with the creature looming over him, the empty gun still clutched in his left hand, the scratches and the bites burning in his right hand, Billy really *knew* for the first time in his life what it meant to be a defenseless victim. When the hulking, unnameable entity put its massive, saber-clawed hands upon him—one on his shoulder, the other on his chest—Billy peed in his pants and was at once reduced to the pitiable condition of a weak, helpless child.

He was sure the demon was going to tear him apart, crack his spine, decapitate him, and suck the marrow out of his bones, but instead it lowered its malformed face to his throat and put its gummy lips against his throbbing carotid artery. For one wild moment, Billy thought it was kissing him. Then he felt its cold tongue lick his throat from collarbone to jaw line, up and down, again and again, an obscene sensation the purpose of which he did not understand. Abruptly he was stung, a short sharp prick which was followed by sudden and complete paralysis.

The creature lifted its head and studied his face. Its breath stank worse than the sulfurous odor exuded by its repellent flesh. Unable to close his eyes, in the grip of a paralysis so complete that he could not even blink, Billy stared into the demon's maw and saw its moon-white, prickled tongue writhing like a fat worm.

The beast stepped back. Unsupported, Billy dropped limply to the floor. Though he strained, he could not move a single finger.

Grabbing a handful of Billy's well-oiled hair, the beast began to drag him out of the bedroom. He could not resist. He could not even protest, for his voice was as frozen as the rest of him.

He could see nothing but what moved past his fixed gaze, for he could neither turn his head nor roll his eyes. He had



glimpses of furniture past which he was dragged, and of course he could see the walls and the ceiling above, over which eerie shadows cavorted. When inadvertently rolled onto his stomach, he felt no pain in his cruelly twisted hair, and thereafter he could see only the floor in front of his face and the demon's clawed black feet as it trod heavily toward the kitchen, where the chase had begun.

Billy's vision blurred, cleared, blurred again, and for a moment he thought his failing sight was related to his paralysis. But then he understood that copious but unfelt tears were pouring from his eyes and, doubtless scalding, were streaming down his face. In all his mean and hateful life, he had no memory of having wept before.

He knew what was going to happen to him.

In his racing, fear-swollen heart, he *knew*.

The stinking, oozing beast dragged him rudely through the dining room, banging him against the table and chairs. It took him into the kitchen, pulling him through spilled beer, over a carpet of scattered Doritos. The thing plucked the old woman's black purse from the table and stood it on the floor, within Billy's view. The unzipped mouth of the bag yawned wide.

The demon was noticeably smaller now, at least in its legs and torso and head, although the arm—with which it held fast to Billy—remained enormous and powerful. With horror and amazement, but not with much surprise, Billy watched the creature crawl into the purse, shrinking as it went. Then it pulled him in after it.

He did not feel himself shrinking, but he must have grown smaller in order to fit through the mouth of the purse. Still paralyzed and still being held by his hair, Billy looked back under his own arm and saw the kitchen light beyond the mouth of the purse, saw his own hips balanced on the edge of the bag above him, tried to resist, saw his thighs coming in, then his knees, the bag was swallowing him, oh God, he could do nothing about it, the bag was swallowing him, and now only his feet were still outside, and he tried to dig his toes in, tried to resist, but could not.

Billy Neeks had never believed in the existence of the soul, but now he knew beyond doubt that he possessed one—and that it had just been claimed.

His feet were in the purse now. All of him was inside the purse.

Still looking back under his arm as he was dragged down by his hair, Billy stared desperately at the oval of light above and behind him. It was growing smaller, smaller, not because the zipper was being closed up there, but because the hateful beast was dragging him a long way down into the bag, which made the open end appear to dwindle the same way the mouth of a turnpike tunnel dwindled in the rear-view mirror as you drove toward the other end.

The other end.

Billy could not bear to think about what might be waiting for him at the other end, at the bottom of the purse and beyond it.

He wished that he could go mad. Madness would be a welcome escape from the horror and fear that filled him. Madness would provide sweet relief. But evidently part of his fate was that he should remain totally sane and *acutely* aware.

The light above had shrunk to the size of a small, pale, oblate moon riding high in a night sky.

It was like being born, Billy realized—except that, this time, he was being born out of light and into darkness, instead of the other way around.

The albescent moonform above shrank to the size of a small and distant star. The star winked out.

In the perfect blackness, many strange voices hissed a welcome to Billy Neeks.

That night in late-April, the bungalow was filled with distant, echoey screams of terror from so far away that, though carrying through every room of the small house, they did not reach the quiet street beyond the walls and did not draw any attention from nearby residents. The screams continued for a few hours, faded gradually, and were replaced by licking-gnawing-chewing sounds of satisfied consumption.

Then silence.

Silence held dominion for many hours, until the middle of the following afternoon, when the stillness was broken by the sound of an opening door and footsteps.

"Ah," the old woman said happily as she stepped through the kitchen door and saw her purse standing open on the floor. With arthritic slowness, she bent, picked up the bag, and stared into it for a moment.

Then, smiling, she pulled the zipper shut.

# Tiny Feet

by AUGUSTINE FUNNELL

Two weeks ago she'd had  
the child cut from her womb,  
as though it were a cancer.  
And now, just like a malignancy,  
it had returned.

Could there be anything more depressing than snow in the city? For eight consecutive days slate-grey skies had hurled an unending stream of snowflakes at streets already lined with mountainous banks and clogged with dirty slush. From where Leigh sat in the window alcove watching pedestrians trying vainly to leap giant puddles or getting sprayed by vehicles lurching down the street she wondered if it would ever end. And almost immediately decided she didn't care. Let it snow all winter, and all summer too.

She turned away from the frosty windowpanes and pulled her knees up under her chin, sitting with eyes closed to the apartment before her, mind closed to thoughts that nibbled at the edges, trying to attract her attention. She thought instead of how much the apartment needed cleaning, how the cupboard was dangerously bare, how the laundry needed doing, and any number of other, peripheral things, until with a start she realized her eyes were open and she was staring blankly at the wall opposite, another ten minutes gone, six hundred seconds less she had to kill.

To kill.

She thrust it away violently, and turned again to stare out the window. Where did God get all that snow anyway? White, pure, like a baby's soul. . . .

She wondered if she looked as ragged as she felt, knew it to be so. Two weeks ago, sick of the scarecrow features and sunken, red-rimmed eyes staring accusingly back at her from a pale face framed with limp, dark hair, she had turned the bedroom mirror

to the wall and left the mirrored medicine cabinet door open so she wouldn't suddenly catch herself staring at her own reflection, trying to catch a glimpse of the evil thing that lived inside her. It was the same thing that made her a present of dreams she couldn't sleep through, drenched in red, huge buckets of red....

Again she caught the beast nibbling at chinks in her armor, and she dispatched reinforcements to fend it off. The laundry. Concentrate on the laundry. She was wearing the last of her available clothes, and even they were on their third day of service. The laundry, then. Now.

She forced herself to turn away from the world outside, and wandered about the apartment straightening things before heading into the bedroom to stuff all her soiled laundry into plastic garbage bags. When she was finished she had filled three of them, and the effort had drained from her any desire to see the job through. Still, she forced herself to collect the soap and fabric softener from beneath the sink, and with the first of the garbage bags started for the basement laundry room.

She was immediately aware of the quietness of the hallway and the stairs at its end, pressing in on her like a thick fist of silence. Dead noise. Half-way down the first flight she had to stop, take a deep breath, and reprimand herself for the direction of her thoughts. *Quit doing this! It's guilt, that's all, and you haven't done anything to be guilty about!*

It got her down to the second storey, then to the ground floor, and finally to the laundry room. She sorted the clothes into piles according to color, then started the first load and returned upstairs to lug down the other two garbage bags. When she came back she was momentarily surprised to find someone else there; she was not at all surprised to discover it was Miss Holbert from the second floor, she of the sharp ear and keen eye, possessed with an unflagging interest in the doings of others. For an instant after the old woman saw Leigh she was unable to hide her surprise, but she got over it quickly. "Hello, dear. You startled me."

*I must look like Death itself.* She mumbled something incomprehensible, noticing the few items Miss Holbert had brought to wash as her pretense for being there. It occurred to her that the old woman must have been frantic with curiosity the past three weeks, listening for her tread in the hallway, hoping for a glimpse of her on the stairs. Now that the opportunity had finally presented itself, how long would it take?

She began to sort the remaining clothes, pointedly ignoring the old woman and hoping the hint would be taken, knowing full well it would not.

"You don't look well, dear."

"I'm fine," Leigh told her woodenly, without looking up.

"Yes, well, perhaps you should see a doctor anyway."

"I've seen all the doctors I care to see, Miss Holbert."

"But dear, when a woman has been ... in the family way, she should—"

"She should *what*?" Leigh demanded, standing away from the laundry with hands on her hips to face the wrinkled old woman squarely. Three weeks of frustration, anger, and guilt, punctuated by nightmares which had given her no rest, had simmered for days. Now, with the added flame provided by the old woman's eager nosiness and infuriating insensitivity, they had boiled to the surface and erupted.

Miss Holbert's lips began to move, then quivered, but nothing came out. Startled, she took a quick step backward, cheeks pinkening.

"And how would you know anyway?" Leigh persisted, aware on some lower level of consciousness that this wasn't entirely necessary, but unwilling on the upper levels to call a halt to it. "How many babies have *you* had aborted, Miss Holbert?"

"Ab ... or ..." It was soft, disbelieving, trailing into silence so quickly she might not have spoken at all.

It was too late to stop now; she couldn't have if she'd wanted to. "No miscarriage, no tragic fall down a flight of stairs, nothing of the sort. *Aborted*, you understand? Gone! And Graham's gone too. Now is there anything else you'd like to know before I finish my laundry?"

Miss Holbert was afraid; it showed in her eyes and the tightness of her cheeks. And Leigh realized she'd been shouting, impaling the old woman with a glare more ferocious than any she could have consciously dredged up from her repertoire of expressions. Curiously, she saw the cringing figure before her through a mist of some sort ... It took a few seconds to realize tears had come.

Miss Holbert mumbled something that could not pass through the roaring in Leigh's ears, then nearly stumbled over the piles of laundry as she made her confused and embarrassed departure, leaving behind the things she'd brought to wash. Miserably Leigh

watched her go, then attacked the rest of the laundry, flinging the separated items onto their respective piles until the roaring in her ears began gradually to lessen and was finally replaced by familiar laundry-room noises. Mechanically she finished the sorting, then placed the loads inside the washers and measured in the detergent. She started the machines about their tasks and left the laundry room, certain Miss Holbert would not return but unwilling to be there if she did. Besides, someone else might come . . .

Back in the apartment she became aware of just how messy everything was, and although she made an effort to straighten furniture and arrange magazines and clear dirty dishes from various resting places about the room, all too quickly she became sidetracked and was thinking of the laundry room and Miss Holbert. From there it was such a small step to the reason for her anger and the flare-up, and from there an even smaller step to the guilt and hurt.

And Graham's gone too! she had shrieked, spitting it out for the old bag when for three weeks she had told herself to keep her own counsel, to let the gossips and rumor-mongers think and say what they would. Now she'd given them the precise information they wanted, and for a certainty Miss Holbert would have it through the building by supertime.

And Graham's gone too.

Without becoming aware of it until there was no chance of stopping she was crying again, a gentle sorrow as much for things never experienced as for things lost. She tried, but she couldn't get his face from her mind; his expressions, the first from when she'd told him her suspicions about being pregnant, the second when she'd decided what she was going to do, and the third from when he'd left her. One so alive, shining with something very close to joy, the second disbelieving and tinged with horror, the third hard and cold, like gravestone granite braced to endure the decades, unchanging. With the images, words . . . hundreds of thousands of words, arguments he'd constructed, pleading he was too proud to do for anything less than this facet of his life that had become so important. They became louder until they nearly drowned out her thoughts. *"What about his possibilities?"* emphasis on the third syllable to drive the point home. Then, from his enormous store of admired figures, the litany. From the literary world, *"It could be another Kotzwinkle"*; from the sports arena, *"Another Orr, or a Stargell"*; from the world stage, *"Gandhi, or Mother Theresa."* The words continued, bouncing around the inside of her skull like

pinballs gone berserk, but as always when they pounded her she was able to silence them easily by recalling her hissed and bitter response to his hopes and dreams: "*Or another Hitler, or a Manson!*" The rebuttal had stung her as much as him, but since she hadn't permitted it to show he could only interpret that part of her as icy and cruel and inflexible.

In the end, after all the words and tears and accusations from one to the other and back again had been exhausted, she had refused to change her decision; she gave him the option of accepting it or leaving, certain in her heart of hearts that he would stay and when it was over they could patch things back together and get on with their life. But Graham had left, calling her cruel, vicious names, and she had gone through with it alone, come home alone, and now recuperated alone, still certain she didn't want a child or the mind-numbing and dreary responsibilities it entailed, ever; still certain the right had been hers to exercise; still certain her choice had been the proper one. But the certainties were framed with hurt, for at night the bed was large—warm only in the depression of her body—and the feel of him beside her seemed something from a hundred years away. Six weeks without intercourse, they'd told her at the clinic before the actual abortion, and she'd seen the time as important for her to begin mending fences with Graham, without the pressure of sex to heighten the tensions. But of course it had never materialized. In its place was guilt and the hurt of abandonment when most she needed care, and she refused to turn to those agencies specifically concerned with such problems, for they were but pale imitations of what she wanted so much and needed so desperately. They would only make her more aware of what had gone wrong, and she wanted nothing to do with them. The twice when representatives had telephoned she'd assured them their help wasn't required, and that had been that.

Except that at night she had nightmares about butchered babies, and heard Graham's desperate pleading while his image hovered accusingly over her. Awakening from those dreams she would find the bed moist with perspiration born of fright, and the air thick with fading echoes of a sound soft to begin with. And there would be no one there when she reached out for solace. Now she'd compounded the problem by blabbing to the building's resident information dissemination expert—Graham's description, damn it—the hurt at the core of her soul. Shame edged into that corner of her heart where she kept her hurt and guilt and

loneliness.

Still the snow drifted down.

She wondered if returning to work would help any. The ad agency for which she toiled had agreed to a temporary leave of absence, but she knew it had been given reluctantly. Could she face everyone there yet? She didn't think so.

When she finally went back to transfer the laundry from washers to dryers—too late for the fabric softener—Miss Holbert's things were gone, and the room was as quiet as a vacuum in limbo.

The sky, miraculously, was clear; stars glittered like diamonds half submerged in ink, and the air was crisp and cold. Perhaps a bad move to be out in the chill, but she couldn't take any more of the cramped, empty apartment; the crunch of her boots on semi-frozen slush was just different enough to provide a small distraction. But only temporarily, for all too soon she made the jump from the sound of them to the sound in the night, the one that faded as she awakened.

She'd walked only seven or eight blocks from the apartment, then turned and strolled back, finding as she neared the building that sense of dread was descending, heavier with each step. It would not have been this bad if Graham had stayed. But he had been too caught up in . . . in—the phrase came to her as though struggling to break free of elastic bonds—the pitter-patter of tiny feet, and presented with silence in his world he had chosen to present her with solitude in hers. She couldn't blame him, but it was easy to hate him for it.

Mercifully, there was no one in the stairwell, nor in the third floor corridor, and she was able to return to the apartment without having to offer any pretense of the casual courtesy expected of residents of the same building. The apartment, even though she had left the lights on so she wouldn't have to come back to the darkness, seemed a thing of angles and shadows, with none of that comforting warmth the soft lighting generally provided.

She took a quick shower, longing for a protracted soak but knowing she'd have to wait a couple weeks yet, and towed herself dry. When she crawled into bed an hour later it was, as usual, on the same side she'd slept when Graham had slept there, and only gradually did she move toward the center. The silence became more constant, broken less and less often by the noise of cars pass-



ing on the street below. After a while she became aware of the tremendous tension inside her, as if she had been listening for something; some noise, perhaps, or the familiar sound of absent breathing.

Or maybe it was footfalls.

*Damn Graham, anyway!*

She awoke with a start, for the first time in two weeks not with the sticky tendrils of nightmare insinuated through her mind. Something else had awakened her, some soft, barely audible sound, repeated rapidly for a few seconds then permitted to trail into silence. It was not a part of a dream as other sounds had been . . . she had not awakened thinking she heard echoes; rather, the actual sounds had awakened her. She strained to catch them again, but they didn't come. For an instant she debated the merits of getting up to investigate, then dismissed both action and sound. Her mind was playing tricks on her, it had to be; it was to be expected. She rolled over, reaching out unconsciously for someone who wasn't there, leaving her arm outstretched when no one responded.

She was almost asleep again when the noise returned, a soft, rapid padding that seemed to start near the apartment entrance and quickly advance to the closed bedroom door before it ceased and silence returned. This time Leigh sat up, but she made no move to get out of bed. She squinted through the darkness at the door, and waited.

Nothing.

For three long minutes she sat quietly, hardly daring to breathe, waiting. What light there was through the window was faint, not nearly bright enough to illuminate anything clearly. A knot of apprehension formed in her chest; she forced it down, but couldn't drive after it the knowledge of what the noise had sounded like. For as long as she could she refused to give it a name, trying instead to concentrate on how many other things it might have been, carrying the possibilities to their most extreme limits. If she had burglars, the very best thing she could do was stay exactly where she was; let them take what they wanted; far better to have to report a burglarized apartment in the morning than be carted away to the morgue tonight.

But she knew very well no burglar had made the noise.

Outside, a car crunched down the ice-crystalled street, the purr of its motor momentarily distracting. When it had passed,

she strained to hear any further sounds from the outer apartment, but there were none. If it *had* been a burglar, surely he'd be gone by now . . .

Cautiously, her heart racing, she crept out of bed and stole across the carpet to the door, listening for over a minute before gathering her courage and slowly, carefully, opening it. Though it was dark, larger windows made the living room brighter than the bedroom, and she could see the chain still across the apartment door. The windows *looked* secure . . .

Emboldened by the apparent lack of activity or presence of intruders, she stepped into the living room and flicked on the light switch. Illumination flooded the area, and she squinted momentarily until her eyes adjusted to the sudden brilliance. Already she felt better; it was clear no one was in the apartment. Still, she searched the living room and kitchen, then more cautiously the bathroom, finding no one. She managed a nervous smile, then caught her reflection in the medicine chest mirror and erased it immediately, struck by the hollow, pointed face, and haunted, bloodshot eyes.

And when had she closed the medicine chest door?

Something icy scratched at her heart for a few seconds; obviously she had done it this afternoon, upset by the incident with Miss Holbert. With a determination belied by thin, shaking hands ending in things that resembled claws more than fingers, she reached out and opened the door, banishing the scarecrow image. Finding, wedged between an aspirin bottle and a Midol packet, a tiny thing of blue-trimmed white wool, carefully knitted, with a short drawstring to close the opening around a delicate ankle. With a hint of hysteria creeping up on her she wondered which foot it was for. Then she reached for it, felt its softness and examined it closely, still not entirely sure it was that which it was. It had not, absolutely not, no way at all, just was *not* there earlier this afternoon, nor was it there when she'd taken her shower. The thermometer she used to take her temperature every day was right there beside the aspirin bottle; she knew she would not have overlooked the bootie.

She flung it away suddenly as if it had burst into flame, watching it bounce off the water tank on the back of the toilet and careen off the toilet seat into the bowl where it turned lazily in the water, the blue drawstring trailing behind. Quickly she reached out and flushed the thing away, watching without blinking until it had disappeared and fresh water replaced the old. She had to

lean against the wall to steady herself, realizing for the first time how weak her knees were, how sweaty her forehead, how thundering her pulse. She swallowed loudly, managed to stand without support, and checked one more time to be sure the bootie was gone. Then she walked back to the living room and sat on the couch for several minutes, waiting for her heartbeat to return to normal. When it had, she got up and returned to bed, deciding to leave the living room light on. But she closed the bedroom door.

It was nearly two hours before she managed to doze off, but her slumber was devoid of rest and punctuated with the all-too-familiar forms of babies bleeding and dead; and now, grotesquely, they ran, on and on, blindly.

Morning found her tired but unable to stay in bed; there was sunshine through the windows, but there was neither warmth nor comfort in it. She picked at portions of a meagre breakfast, then sat in the window alcove, watching the world pass by below. As the morning wore on she realized there was nothing else for it; she'd have to talk to her doctor, find out if any or all of this was normal, and see if a sedative was recommended. But it was a Wednesday, a day the doctor was unavailable for anything but emergencies and had her non-urgent calls looked after by other physicians; the answering service taking the calls wouldn't contact the doctor without first knowing at least something of the nature of the problem, and Leigh had no wish to even begin explaining it over the telephone to strangers paid to divert her. She assured the answering service the problem could wait, then called the ad agency and arranged for another week's extension of the leave of absence. Her superior had not been delighted, but there had been at least a superficial concern, and the request was granted without any mention of future difficulties if the absence continued much longer.

The clear skies and sunshine lasted until early afternoon, then yielded to clouds and, shortly thereafter, more snow. A wind developed, and it drove the flurries before it with something seeming to Leigh to resemble an angry malice. Propelled into any corner the wind chose to force them, the flurries could only grow in number, they could not fight back; watching them from her vantage point in the alcove she shivered and drew her sweater more tightly about her shoulders, identifying more strongly with the specks of frozen water than she knew was reasonable. But for a

time it served to divert her attention from those thoughts that again today nibbled at the edges of her mind, ripping tiny holes in armor she could not keep repaired. And they were given the extra strength of sounds in the night and wool in the medicine chest. She still had no solution for either puzzle, but she wasn't seeking any. She wanted to forget all about it, just let it die and fade into the morass of yesterday, to never again be thought of.

More than anything she wanted it to go away.

Suppertime had always been the day's major meal, but this day—as on so many the last three weeks—it was no more substantial than breakfast; she wondered why she even bothered to fix it in the first place. She scraped its remains into the garbage, put the dishes into the sink, and wandered about the apartment, not wanting to stay in, but reluctant to leave before her doctor's okay; tempting fate once was enough.

Television, as usual, provided nothing of interest, or even diversion. After half an hour of watching a screen whose images the mind refused to absorb she flicked it off and sat back, eyes closed, listening. The noise of early evening traffic blended with the soft hum of her refrigerator and the barely detectable buzz of the kitchen's florescent lighting. For a fleeting instant she felt light and free, a single strand in a finely woven tapestry of noise; almost, she could hear the rush of blood flowing through her arteries, fresh from the cleansing process. Then, inexplicably, it seemed that her heartbeat changed just enough that it was no longer a spaced beat, but a more rapid, slightly irregular thing. Like the clump of a toddler's footsteps.

She couldn't escape it; breathing through lips drawn tightly over clenched teeth she wondered why she was doing this to herself. Were her beliefs so flimsy and feebly rooted that they couldn't stand the test of reality? If so, why hadn't her views changed? Why hadn't she embraced the philosophy of the fetus as human being at the moment of conception?

She still had no answers. But she did have guilt she couldn't explain, hurt she couldn't lessen, and loss she couldn't alleviate. It was as if something with fists ramming into the very crevices of her psyche pounded at her mind, refusing to let it go in any other direction. It was almost a physical thing, joined to her like an emotional umbilical.

She shuddered, forced the thought away, and knew that as soon as her efforts to repulse it subsided it would begin to return,

languorously, until it held her again.

She wanted to cry, but the ducts had closed and would not open, regardless of the internal pressure placed on them; there simply were no more tears in her. But she had to do something. The something became a thing she had promised herself she would not do: she called Graham. He was very calm and very rational and very patient as he explained, without waiting for her to give a reason why she'd called, that there was no reason for her to be calling him, that nothing which had led to the separation could be changed, and that there was simply no future for them with the vast philosophical differences they ...

She hung up on him. It had never been her way to seek help when troubled; reaching out to Graham had taken more strength than she had known she possessed, and his response left her weak and bitter, a forceful reminder of why she had never reached out to anyone in terms of permanency before. She wasn't sure what few people she called friends would be interested in the problem or able to help beyond offering the usual sympathetic platitudes ... she wasn't sure she wanted to confide in them anyway. Certainly not now, with no substantiation but her own experience, and that passed on uncertainly. She wished she had not flushed the bootie away; it would at least have offered proof to *her* that something had happened. Unless she'd put it there herself ...

Was this the way madness began? Did one do something, forget it, then drive oneself mad trying to concoct a believable story to fill the vacated hole in the memory? Why would one's subconscious even bother? Was an unrecognized guilt she wouldn't admit to reality strong enough to do this to her?

Desperately she wanted not answers but silence and peace in her mind. She had always thought the means to that silence and peace was the struggle for truth and the search for answers to questions, but now it seemed that forgetting the questions was the better way: she just didn't want to know.

When she finally went to bed, after watching the street from the alcove in the pitch black apartment, the cars in the street had dwindled to hardly any, and pedestrians had long ago gone in for the night; there was stillness everywhere but her mind, and it didn't seem fair that at two in the morning her soul alone should be hung out to dry in an acid wind.

Exhausted, she changed into pajamas and tried to sleep, but there were too many images dancing under her eyelids, and the

process took far longer than it should have.

The luminous dial of her alarm clock said four-seventeen. It took a moment for that to register, and when it did something else did as well: some noise had awakened her. Some soft, padding noise, and when it had come to a halt a sound very much like wind sighing through winter-bare oak branches had replaced it for a second before it too melted into silence. She knuckled sleep from her eyes, the afterimages of something small and bleeding filling her mind before dissipating like fog before a noonday sun.

Almost before she was ready to start listening the padding sounds returned, loud at first, diminishing slightly as whatever made them reached the outer door. Then, beginning softly and getting louder, the trip back; again the abrupt halt and replacement by a high, windlike noise. But this time she detected a syllable, long and drawn out, followed by a second that died almost as soon as it started. And it sent slivers of ice deep into her heart.

It started again, though she had to strain to catch it; there was a noise from the bathroom as something in the medicine chest fell against one of the glass shelves, then the clumping footfalls padded back to the bedroom door.

There was a scratching at the bottom of the door, and when it started upward Leigh thought her heart would stop. In the darkness she sat and stared at the door, blankets clutched in hands clenched so tight her knuckles hurt. Still the scratching continued, up, up toward the doorknob. But Leigh could tell there was still a long way to go when the scratching stopped, and she exhaled for the first time since the footsteps had left the bathroom.

"Maawwwwwwwwwww—"

Leigh's breath was sharp; it hurt just under the lower ribcage when she inhaled, and she sat in shivering silence, waiting . . .

"—mee."

The scratching resumed, and almost, Leigh giggled. Then the high-pitched breeze, the gentle whisper of wind through leaves, and nearly unbearable horror: "Maaawwwwwwwwwmee."

There was a brief respite from scratching, but it was filled with the pitter-patter of tiny feet toddling back and forth between apartment door and bedroom, bathroom and bedroom, and once when it seemed to fade out altogether Leigh imagined it had gone into the kitchen. She started to get up then, fumbling for the nightstand light, knocking it over and with sinking heart listening to the tinkle

of breaking glass. She cursed, but there was no force behind it. The clump of returning footfalls came to her then, and the scratching resumed.

"Maaawwwwwwwwwwwwmee."

Leigh shuddered, a tiny ripple of movement that should have stopped when she reached for the topmost blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders; but it didn't ... it reached her and ricocheted back, until she stood beside the bed trembling uncontrollably, perspiration moistening her forehead and making tiny rivers down to her cheeks and chin. Her breaths came quickly, sharply, and until pain shot through her gums she didn't realize she'd clenched her teeth; even then she could barely relax the jaw muscles, and only long enough to swallow.

"Maaawwwwwwwwwwwwwwmee."

Terror built, first a solid ball of ice in the pit of her stomach, then an expanding fireball that novaed in her brain and fired dollops of lava into her bloodstream so that every part of her was on fire, shaking in the darkness. She didn't know she had dropped the blanket.

She was running for the door before she knew what she was doing, shrieking something that might have been any number of words, the whole of it propelled with a terror that had grown fingers and seized her body; it pulled her, and she could not find the power even to think of resisting. She fumbled for the doorknob, found it and turned until it would turn no more; she wrenched the door open violently, took one step and stumbled over something she had not seen, something that in the very furthest depths of her brain she had believed could not be there. When she righted herself to a sitting position she was turned toward the bathroom, her back to the open bedroom door. Something crawled, mewling, behind her, and the sweat on her forehead went cold. She shivered so violently that she almost couldn't get to her feet, and when she did she nearly stumbled again.

"Maaawwwwwwwwwwwwwwmee," and the scratching of tiny fingers on the carpet.

She was running again, blindly, unable to turn and face what had gotten into her home. Exhaustion and horror had taken her so completely she could think only of lashing out, of fighting back against the thing that had threatened to take control of her life a few months before, and which now, even in death, held her with

elastic fingers that stretched beyond even the grave. She didn't know it was a butcher's knife clutched in an unbreakable grip; she didn't know she advanced upon something that sent spikes of ice and flame alternately through her heart and brain. She knew only that something small, something eternal pursued her in its childlike way, and would pursue her forever. When it crept through the beam of muted illumination from the streetlamp outside she screamed and felt her knees give out, but she lost none of her grip on the butcher's knife. When it crawled close enough and looked up at her with eyes like those of a chick dead in the shell, reached out with tiny fingers bloody from scratching at the bottom of her bedroom door, opened lips set in its foetally indistinguishable face, and said, "Mawwmee," like a child cold and frightened and newly found, the absolute horror of it became more than she could bear. She lashed out, swinging sideways at the unprotected throat, slashing and stabbing frenziedly until the blood of it spurted in brief jets from a dozen wounds, and its spasms carried it in as many different directions. When its final twitch had passed it lay, half-in, half-out of the light through the window, and Leigh saw that the right foot was bare; the left was wrapped snugly in a blue-trimmed cocoon of wool, with a drawstring pulled snug and tied in a pretty little bow.

Quietly, she whimpered, and when her breath returned, she giggled softly in the darkness.

It was Graham, notified by Miss Holbert that there was a peculiar smell coming from the apartment—and perhaps he'd like to check it out since it wasn't any of *her* business and she didn't like to go to the superintendant if it wasn't necessary—who found the black, and bloated body sitting restfully by the bedroom door, plump, sausagelike fingers holding a spotless butcher's knife. He informed the authorities immediately, then waited for them to arrive before disturbing anything. Since there were no immediately apparent signs of foul play—indeed, the coroner's report would later state that the deceased had starved to death—he was permitted to go through the apartment after the police were finished. There was nothing out of place or anything that offered any explanation of what had happened. He did, though, wonder when Leigh had hung the bootie over the medicine chest mirror. He'd never seen her as the sentimental sort....



# Shells

by JOHN SKIPP  
and CRAIG SPECTOR

Pools of maggots churned over the base of the skull; Marty felt himself drawn into the squirming, sightless dance.

Low tide, and the gentle susseration of baywater waves. Reaching up on the shore, toward the lighter sand some eight feet inland. Falling back in ceaseless cycle, collapsing in the face of the next wave in.

*Also reaching, he thought.*

*Also doomed.*

"You're a cheerful guy," Marty dryly informed himself. "It must be your God-given calling in life: to spread happiness and joy wherever you may roam . . ."

His voice died in mid-rumination. It had plenty of room to die in. The beach was long and chill and all but deserted. It reminded him of the last dozen or so clubs he'd played. His voice had died there, too.

Along with his career, and any hope of its resurrection.

Marty Swansick was philosophical. At this point, it was the only thing left to be. He was forty-five years old. Nearly half of those years had been spent in a grueling, frequently desperate struggle to prove that he really was a hysterically funny guy. His act had been honed to surgical incisiveness by two solid decades of amateur nights, sweaty half-hour stints at places like the Comedy Cellar, the periodic street-corner stand-up routines at Columbus Circle or Washington Square Park. It was a hard life in search of an impossible dream, but the struggle only served to sharpen his edge. Marty Swansick fought like hell and hustled shamelessly while all around him friends sold out or rolled over for a weekly paycheck and a taste of respectability.

And his folly paid off: a couple of miraculous walk-ons for sitcoms had gotten him a bit part in the ill-fated *Long As It Takes* for CBS. The show bombed, but Lasko (the "fleabitten super of a Lower East Side slum") had been roundly acclaimed. Lasko led to Letterman led to Carson led to cable led to a pilot of his own and a slew of bookings in packed houses of increasing distinction.

Suddenly, Marty Swansick had an agent, an upcoming series, and more money than he rightly knew what to do with. Suddenly, the impossible had become the probable had become the likely had become the all-too-easy. And suddenly, over a night that had lasted twenty-seven years, Marty Swansick was a star.

"Was a star," he muttered, affirming the past tense. "For one brief, shining moment that lasted all of two years, you were a star, my friend. You had it all." He let out a dry chuckle of joyless amusement.

"And then," he continued, "in the immortal words of Robin Williams: 'I clawed my way to the middle, and *fucked* my way down ...'"

His soliloquy was interrupted by a thunderous boom from across the water. With the sky clouding over as it was, the sound could have passed for real thunder; but Marty knew it was just the boys down at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds, where the combined might of the United States Military got together to test their toys.

*Like little kids*, he mused, glancing some two hundred yards down the beach at a handful of pre-pubescents. They were the only other people in sight, and they were busy, busy, busy: oblivious to the chilling clouds and ersatz thunder, hard at work on something big.

It was a sand castle, he guessed. And they labored on it with the same kind of single-minded fervor that he imagined going down at ol' Aberdeen, where the hits just kept a-comin' every couple of minutes.

Someday, he thought, they'll get to test those toys for real. Then ol' Marty Swansick can take his place among the other great comedians of his age: Dangerfield, Cosby, Hope, Reagan, Gorbachev, Falwell ... too many to list, all topping the charts on the Hit Parade to oblivion.

Such balming bitterness was scant comfort as Marty watched the kids play. He wondered what, if anything, they thought about the constant exposure to the overtures of the Death Machine.

*Probably think it's neat; all flash and no pain. They have no idea how genuinely scary it is. They have no idea . . .*

There was a sudden stirring behind him. He turned to see a big old bassett hound padding straight for him like a hairy Polish sausage on legs. It came right up, grinning a lop-sided doggie grin, snuffling his feet. He stopped and ran his hand along its well-padded back.

"Well, hey, ol' fella!" he burbled, scratching its floppy ears. The dog just panted and lolled its tongue at him. "So how's tricks, huh? How's life as a witless quadruped?" The insult went clear over his fuzzy friend's head. *Like most of my hecklers*, he observed, continuing to skritch and scratch away.

Another loud ka-boom went off in the interests of world peace and national security. The bassett hound pointed its thick head skyward, eyes flickering with confusion. Marty swatted it playfully on the ass and said, "Big storm brewing, buddy. Better get on home, before it's too late."

The dog went galumphing off through the sand, on a collision course with the kids. He guessed they'd be shooing him away in two minutes flat. It was a dog's life.

*Ain't it the truth*, he thought, feeling the dark clouds gather inside as the surf brushed his feet. A proverbial infinitude of sandy granules lay there, topped by an infinitude of pebbles that sat upon the sand like sprinkles on a sundae. None of which held his interest.

His eyes were focused, instead, on a pretty white shell half-buried at his feet. It was roughly the size of the nail on his pinkie, roughly the color of sun-bleached bone. There was another one beside it. And another. And another. One of them was almost as big as the palm of his hand. But the rest were small. Very small.

There were millions of them, up and down Crystal Beach. They had all been alive once, God only knew how long ago; their deaths had gone unnoticed by all save themselves. And the waves, which pounded them relentlessly into the shore.

*So many tiny souls*, he thought. *All gone. All gone.*  
Just like that.

More sonic booms from Aberdeen. Another chill gust of sea breeze. Marty tucked up the collar of his windbreaker and looked down the beach: two of the kids were playing with the bassett by the base of the expanding castle. He chuckled, momentarily

charmed by nostalgic pangs, then felt his attention drawn inextricably back. Toward the shells. The sand.

While the changing tide reached its liquid fingers out toward the shore, then slipped back in whispering failure. And the last eight months rolled in like those vanquished waves, drowning him in the details of his fall . . .

He'd been warned. Oh, yes. By old friends, by family. By none other than his agent Murray the Shark, who drew him aside in an uncharacteristically paternal tone and said. "Marty, you're a very funny guy. Right now you're on top of the world. Watch. Your. Step."

It was a miracle on the order of the loaves and fishes, this concern. It had almost managed to cut through the high-voltage burble that had become the stuff of daily life. Almost.

"I can protect you from the jackals," he'd said, "and I can protect you from vultures, 'cause that's my job. But I can't. Protect you. From. Yourself."

The words stung with the dead-on accuracy of twenty-twenty hindsight as wave upon lurid wave crashed down . . .

Then there was the drink. The track. The girls girls girls: dozens of them. Outclassing him by a country mile, all aching for a piece of the first real money in his miserable life, encouraging him to believe that it would last forever and ever and . . .

Two thousand a month for his Central Park West co-op with the spectacular view. One-hundred-fifty-dollar dinners for two, every night. Broadway shows at one hundred dollars a clip. Nose candy. The occasional nine-hundred-dollar weekend bacchanal at the Plaza Hotel. More nose candy. A trip or two to Europe.

A lot of trips to Plato's Retreat.

And then, when he was far too far in to ever escape unscathed, the forty-two grand he'd plunked down on his "summer retreat": a quaint little cottage on Crystal Beach, not far from his ancestral stomping grounds of Cecilton, Maryland. It was a place to escape: far from the hurly-burly, with only the crashing waves and the guns of Aberdeen to remind him of worldly reality . . .

"Ah, but let us not forget," he said aloud, "the way I blew the pilot. And let us not forget," while the regret and self-pity welled up in his eyes, "the way I came off as an arrogant, sniping blowhard on my third-and-last Tonight Show appearance. And let us not forget," fingering the long-emptied vial in his pocket, "all the many, many dollars I pissed up my nose or down the drain.

And let us not forget ..."

But he wanted to forget. Oh, yes.

Which was why he'd fled the city. To escape, to recoup, to find the edge he'd lost when life got soft. To watch innocent children who had their lives and dreams still before them, playing in the sand.

To say goodbye.

Marty walked, and watched. While the dark clouds gathered.

And the sunlight waned.

The bassett hound was gone, which didn't surprise him a bit. The castle was spectacular, which surprised him quite a bit. His eyesight, unlike his timing or his credit, was still pretty close to perfect. He could see a fairly awesome display of moats and turrets and sturdy walls from a hundred and fifty yards away.

One of the kids was calling to him. The rest of them joined in, shouting and gesticulating. He hollered, "I CANT HEAR YOU!" and continued toward them, thinking *Hope springs eternal, creation lives, sure I've blown it but I hope to God you kids live long enough to make your dreams come true—*

The first thing he noticed was the jutting pile of sand. At first he'd mistaken it for a washed-out castle; then he realized that the big white thing poking out of the top was the enormous skull of a fish. Its mere size was disorienting enough; as large as the head of a garden trowel, good eating for any hearty fisherman. He drew nearer, checking it out.

It was a fish, alrightee. No doubt about it. But why had it been buried? And why so strangely, so close to the water?

As Marty moved abreast of the mound it occurred to him that the sand beneath the skull was gently stirring. He moved closer still and the cause became apparent.

There were tiny pools of tiny maggots churning over the base of the skull.

"Yuk," he said, addressing the maggots. "That's disgusting." The feeding continued, unshamed. The little-kid shouting continued, unabated, and it wasn't long before the patter of little feet drew near.

"Hey, mister!" his tiny assailant shouted. It was an adorable little boy, maybe six years old: all scruff blond hair and scrawny tan limbs, huge pot belly poking out of Hang Ten shorts. "You gotta see our castle, mister. It's really neat!"

Marty felt himself momentarily torn between the kinetic bundle of enthusiasm before him and the squirming, sightless death-dance behind. It passed quickly; he knew that this would be his last glimpse of Crystal Beach. The sale of the house had been confirmed yesterday. Tomorrow, a Mr. and Mrs. Putnam from Baltimore would take possession, displacing him forever. He would score a modest jump in value which, by the time he settled all his outstanding accounts with the financiers and the snowmen, would leave just about enough to see him through another half a month in the New York City he had grown to despise.

None of which mattered doodly-squat to the kid, whose name was Shaun, who really was six and sizzling with energy. "We gotta hurry!" he cried with all the patience of youth. "The tide's gonna change!"

Marty couldn't argue with that. He gazed down into ebullient blue eyes and felt the crust on his heart soften just a little. "Okay, junior," he smiled. "Lead on."

Shaun took him by the hand. Aberdeen boomed.

And the mound began to crumble under the tide's first kiss.

It was all Marty could do to keep up with the boy's frantic, exuberant pace. They walked on the perimeter of the encroaching surf, heading for the castle. All the while, the kid babbled and bubbled of its glories: how they'd all pitched in, how he'd helped to dig the moat, collect the shells that brightly adorned the walls. All the while, Aberdeen's guns thumped and thudded. As they walked, Marty felt the bleak existential funk that had been pushed so precariously back, thinking, *They really don't know, they have no idea . . .*

And they were there; the four other kids all standing by, alert and beaming. Two more boys, a pair of girls, not a one of them older than twelve. They all stood unmindful of the chill breeze that blew off the water. They all had the same bright eyes and lupine faces, the same giddy exhilaration at being a part of something really special.

On the other hand, he noted, they've got every right to be proud. The castle got better, the closer he came. He could see how they'd used trickling water to "age" the walls and turrets, made pillars from driftwood. He flashed on how high the walls were, and how solid: even from fifty yards' distance, it was without a doubt the best he'd ever seen.



All the while, Shaun kept talking: how great his brothers and sisters were, how they did this all the time but this was the best ever! Marty noted that the walls behind the bold front extended easily four feet toward the water. They'd even pulled up weeds and replanted them to look like a manicured arbor of vines. His heart tugged at the sight of such detail. They'd built an ornate walkway, leading from the driftwood drawbridge over the moat, every bit as impressive as the road to Oz.

A roadway, paved completely with a carpet of diminutive shells.

It was exquisite. It reminded him, somehow, of King Tut's tomb; an archaeological treasure for some future generation to boggle over.

If but for the encroaching tide: Marty suddenly wished himself the camera-toting type, that he might somehow become a part of this fleeting moment. Give them, and himself, something to remember it by . . .

Then the five children clambered around him, enthused. He waded through them, closing in on the wonder they'd wrought. The jokes, the customarily glib patter, weren't forthcoming—he was too much in awe—and when the eldest boy withdrew from the pack, he scarcely even noticed.

The taller of the girls—very pretty, reed-slender—said, "Take a look inside. That's the best part of all." He nodded, obliging, and peered over the wall.

The dog was there, belly-up. The back of its skull had been staved in; a layer of sand had encrusted the exposed brain and bone. Its thick head pointed skyward, dead eyes flecked with sand and confusion. Marty expended perhaps another second in terror and disbelief, staring down at the body.

And then the eldest child returned.

The first blow of the Boy Scout hatchet caught him squarely in the stomach. He could feel his guts blow open. He could hear them. See them. Smell them. He had been wheeling as it happened, so the blow caught him off-balance. He teetered at the edge of the hole, while the hatchet slid wetly away.

The next blow caught him bluntly at the bridge of the nose. It was not quite enough to kill him outright, but the force of the impact was sufficient to topple him backward into the hole.

*My name is Marty Swansick I'm a very funny guy,* were the words that crowded his brain as he landed on the stiffening



hound, the sky roiling crazily above. A genuine burst of thunder erupted; when Aberdeen followed, it seemed pale by comparison.

But the kids; they loved it. They thrived on it. Suddenly, as he stared up into their happy, busy faces, he knew that *They knew!* Suddenly, he knew exactly what the sound meant to them.

It almost made him glad that he was leaving.

Almost.

Then the walls of the castle caved in under a flurry of laughter and limbs, sending sand down to drown him. And Marty fought like hell; he kicked and spit and thrashed with a newfound will to live that might have saved him, a month or a week or a minute earlier. Marty Swansick actually had some edge left, after all.

Too little, too late.

More sand tumbled down. Little stones.

Little shells.

When the tomb was sealed and the ritual concluded, the children clasped hands and smiled. The Big Voice let out another volley of approval. They were thrilled, of course, although they didn't let on: they had too well mastered the innocent faces that were so much a part of their current roles. The youngest stared out across the water in awe as the eldest explained once more:

Soon, very soon, they would inherit the earth. The Big Voice told them so. And there would be so very much to do in that brave new world.

Many exquisite holes to dig.

Many, many rituals to perform.

As they left the beach, more thunder erupted. It was louder—maybe even stronger—but the Big Voice was the one that spoke directly to them.

Soon, it said

Very soon . . .

A little while later, the tide rumbled in.

And the rain began to pour.

# FROM THE DESK OF

by GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

Yet another in the adventures of Sandor Courane, fictional writer and fall-guy extraordinaire.

I liked to think that magic of a quiet sort happened there. Five novels and a lot of short stories had been born in that very room. I was in the middle of a new story at the moment, a kind of wry, ironic tale about a young man without any luck at all. I'd titled it, tentatively at least, "The Man Who Could Work Blunders," an allusion to H. G. Wells's "The Man Who Could Work Miracles." The ending of the story would have to wait, however, until I moved my new word processor into the office and got everything squared away again. I wiped the perspiration from my forehead and looked around hopelessly; the way things were going, that might be several days away.

"The Man Who Could Work Blunders" was not going to be a great story, no matter what happened. It was not destined to win awards and be reprinted through the decades in collections of great fiction of the twentieth century. I had a reputation as a facile writer, a prolific writer, a writer sometimes blessed with interesting ideas; unfortunately, at the same time I was also kind of a crummy writer. The interesting ideas often died sudden deaths, embalmed in various short stories and novelettes like flies in amber. It was often frustrating to read my pieces; they would begin with hope and wonder, but before I successfully realized my concept, my lack of real talent would make itself felt. The characters then proceeded on to the end without further connection to the point of the whole exercise.

During the years of my marriage, at the beginning of my

career, I used to write at the kitchen table late at night, after my wife had fallen asleep. It was lonely sitting in the kitchen with no company but the thin buzzing of the clock on the stove. I used to write my stories out in a spiral-bound notebook in longhand. My wife treated me like a creature from another planet when I wrote my first story. Her attitude changed from patronizing to fearful when it sold to a magazine for two cents a word. Our daughter's illness interrupted my first novel for three months not long thereafter, and the book was ruined forever, at least by my own standards. And my wife, in a gesture of reconciliation, bought me my first typewriter for Christmas; it slowed my output to a slender trickle until I learned how to type.

Those days were not so very long ago. My wife is no longer my wife, of course, and my daughter is on her own, more or less. All of that had happened in fifteen years. A lot of things can happen in fifteen years.

Now I live alone in a larger apartment than any we had lived in as a family. There are two bedrooms, the one in the back converted to an office. At first, I had put only my battered old oak desk in the room with the venerable file cabinet. It had seemed like a stark and lonely place to work, so unlike the warm kitchen. Maybe that's why the stories that came out of that time were also stark and lonely, or maybe there were other reasons. The office didn't remain empty long, however. I needed a bookcase to house my copies of my published pieces; I built it by hammering together one-by-eight pine boards, and I leaned it against the wall beside the oak desk. I filled the bookcase with books and magazines, and I was surprised by how much I had written.

Then I needed another bookcase for the reference books relating to the novel I was working on. I added a third bookcase beside it against the longest wall, filled with standard references: the dictionaries and encyclopedia and thesaurus, the baby-name books, the grammar books and foreign dictionaries and travel books and books of quotations. Above the third bookcase were my framed certificates and awards that proved that I'd actually been doing something for the last fifteen years.

There was a walk-in closet against one of the shorter walls, and beside it the filing cabinet. The fourth wall was taken up by sliding glass doors leading to a small balcony. There wasn't room for much else in the office, but that didn't stop me from acquiring things. Working on two novels and a couple of short stories at

the same time, I bought a low table on which to keep the manuscripts and reference material sorted. It sat in the middle of the room, just behind my swivel chair.

When I made the quantum leap at last and invested in a word processor, everything had to be shifted around again. The daisy-wheel printer could sit on the low table. The computer console itself would just fit on the desk, if I cleared away the books, the piles of correspondence, the divided vertical file, the clock, the postage scale, the radio, and the tax records. That part was easy to think about; finding new locations for all those items would be more difficult.

It didn't take several days, after all. By midnight of the same day the computer arrived, my office was back in a kind of order. As close to order as it ever was. The only things that still needed to be moved were the small photocopier and my telephone answering machine. On the verge of admitting defeat, too weary to bother about more aesthetic solutions, I brought in another table and set it up in front of the big closet. I put the copier and answering machine there, and told myself that I would never need to use any of the things in the closet; not until winter, at least.

In the morning I went back to work on "The Man Who Could Work Blunders." It took me a long time to get used to writing my first draft on a glowing screen instead of a sheet of yellow paper. I made a lot of mistakes, hitting keys that did unusual and irrevocable things to my hard work. Slowly I learned how to use my new machine. It was, after all, a labor-saving device. I was able to tinker with my prose until I had it just right; in the past, I had submitted stories with concealed weak spots, things that I knew I ought to change but wasn't willing to retype whole pages to fix. Now I could alter anything, time and again, before I had the printer deliver the final version. Even afterward, if I spotted something else, I could call up that page and make yet another correction; in a matter of seconds, the computer would do for me what used to take a quarter of an hour of tedious work.

The pertinent question—which I avoided, of course—was if my puny prose and meager career could justify the expense of the computer in the first place. I left that to others to debate; I had work to do. First, I typed into the computer's memory as much of "The Man Who Could Work Blunders" as I had written on my old typewriter. Then I added a few pages of new material. I read over everything and decided that I had to revise a couple of

paragraphs. It was so simple. By the end of the day, I was positive that the word processor had already begun to earn its keep.

It wasn't until the next morning that I learned just how true that judgment was.

Opening my first bottle of Guinness of the day and putting it carefully on the desk beside the computer, I read over the last page of the story, still displayed in white letters on a green background. I consulted the notes to see what was going to happen next; I needed a scene between my main character and his psychiatrist, which would plant a seed of doubt in the character's mind, but let the reader know that everything that had happened so far was not illusion or hallucination, but absolutely real. It was a tricky bit of dialogue. It would have to be handled carefully. I didn't feel like tackling it, and so I was glad when the telephone rang. I didn't want to talk to anyone yet, either; I let the answering machine take it. By flicking a little switch on the tape recorder, I could monitor the call.

"Hello," said the answering machine in my voice, "This is Sandor Courane. I'm not able to answer the phone in person at the moment, but if you'll leave your name and number, I'll get back to you as soon as possible. You'll have thirty seconds to leave your message."

Beep.

"Hello, Sandy? Rocky." That was Steinschlager, the associate editor of *Awesome Stories*. "You know we're on a tight schedule, and that cover has already gone to the printer, so I need the rewrite of your Wells piece as soon as possible. We've got your name splattered all over the cover and the contents page of the magazine. We're both going to look silly if the story isn't in it. Call me collect when—" There was an abrupt silence when Steinschlager's thirty seconds were up.

So whether or not I liked it, "The Man Who Could Work Blunders" would have to be finished by tomorrow at four o'clock. It would have to be in the mail, on its way to New York, by five.

I began to write:

"Now tell me, Mr. Edelman," said the psychiatrist, "just how long have you had this problem?"

There was something very wrong. I stared at the sentence and wondered what was bothering me so much. I glanced at my notes;

everything had been crossed off until #5: *scene with shrink*. I shrugged. My subconscious mind was trying to tell me something, and I always tried to listen to my subconscious. Actually, it was my subconscious that earned the living; I just did the manual labor. I read back over the last few paragraphs from the day before, thinking that the trouble, as on so many previous occasions, was just a poor transition from one scene to the next.

The trouble was simpler than that, yet more difficult to explain. The main character, whom I had named Charlie Edelman, was named Jim Collins in the preceding paragraphs. I muttered a few words for which I'd never get a nickel apiece. This was the trouble with working on more than one thing at a time; every once in a while, despite all my care and discipline, sometimes things got mixed up. I looked at my notes once again, but I discovered that in the notes the guy was called Charlie Edelman. I was *sure* that Charlie Edelman had always been in this story, and I was suddenly aware that I had never, anywhere, used a name like Jim Collins. I hated simple, common names like that in stories; I always tried to pick slightly ethnic names, just for variety.

As I read through the draft of the pages stored in the computer's memory, Charlie Edelman was nowhere to be seen; and this guy Jim Collins was having a hilarious time dealing with his new powers. It was a very funny story. It was even funnier than the way I'd written it.

Half the bottle of Guinness went down while I tried to understand what had happened. I had fed in the first part of the story yesterday, just as I had written it at my old typewriter. Then I'd gone through and made a few corrections here and there, nothing vital. Somehow I accomplished more than I realized: the story was fresher, tighter, funnier. I thought I understood what happened: without the tedious labor of retyping, I was inclined to do more polishing with the word processor than I ever did before. The damn machine was making a better writer out of me, as well as a more prolific one. I smiled and gulped the rest of the beer.

The name business still bothered me, though. I could take care of that easily enough; I consulted my operating manual and learned that I could change the name wherever it occurred in the story with a few simple commands. I ordered the computer to edit out Jim Collins and edit in Charlie Edelman. I called up earlier pages to see if I'd done that job correctly, and I was pleased to see that

Jim Collins no longer existed.

I took a short break to crack another bottle of Guinness. In my mind I chose among the possible evil things I could put in Jim Collins's path—no, Edelman's path. I frowned. I sat down at the computer and stared at the last sentence of my story. The psychiatrist had spoken; what did Edelman have to say?

"Not long, doctor," said Edelman. "I guess it all began when I made that foolish wish."

"A wish?" said the analyst.

"Yes. You see, I had been trying to work up the courage to ask

To ask what? I wondered. What did this jerk Edelman want: a raise? A few days off? His boss's daughter? I took a swallow of beer and realized that Edelman was, indeed, in love with his boss's daughter. It was hopeless, of course: the girl had been educated at the best schools and was already engaged to marry a prince from a tiny European principality. The only course open to Edelman was wishing and hoping. He was probably tossing pennies into fountains and scouring the evening sky for the first star. The whole point was that Charlie Edelman was a lovable loser, the type who might love the boss's daughter but who didn't stand a chance of winning her on his own. In the past, in more romantic times, the supernatural powers with which Edelman had suddenly been blessed would have led to an entertaining confusion, but in the end the ritzy girl would realize what a marvelous human being he was. Today, however, this was satire; Edelman would *not* end up with the girl. It would be a miracle if he kept his job.

I paused to make a note of my decision. It clarified things even more. The story began to pour out of me. It was easy, even fun, to compose directly on the video display screen. I wasn't interrupted by the need to change sheets of paper. Writing had become a continuous process, a fluid, creative act. The story was paced better because it was one long, coherent piece, rather than bits of exposition strung together like beads on a string. I was startled to learn that writing could be so enjoyable again; it was like the feeling I had had at the beginning of my career, a joy that I'd lost somewhere along the way.

Nevertheless, there came a point when my skimpy notes did not offer me enough inspiration. I slowed down and then stopped, wondering what was going to happen next. It seemed that I'd written myself into a corner with no way out. It meant reading over

the last couple of paragraphs, possibly throwing them away and going off in a different direction. That sort of thing was what the computer was for in the first place; I could wipe out those paragraphs and replace them as often as I liked, and I could save the discarded work in case I decided to go with it, after all.

"Charlie," said Celeste, "what does this mean?"

"Oh, I've been meaning to tell you about it." Edelman wondered how he would explain it to her.

Edelman wasn't the only one who was wondering. I finished my second bottle of stout and decided that it was time to take a break. With any kind of luck, there was a ballgame on television.

Yes, there was an afternoon ballgame on the cable (the Braves at Chicago) and it went into extra innings. After the game, intending to go back to work, I opened my fifth bottle of Guinness and put it beside the word processor. I looked at the clock and remembered that there was some movie I wanted to see; I couldn't recall which film. I frowned at the glowing screen of the computer, which still displayed that last sentence I'd written. During the baseball game, I hadn't come to a decision about how Edelman was going to explain himself to Celeste. I let my breath out in a heavy sigh; I really didn't *feel* like working. I decided to let the *TV Guide* decide the matter. If it was a good movie, I'd watch it; if it was a mediocre or bad picture, I'd work. It turned out to be Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*; there was no way I was going to miss that. I loved the way Strother Martin said, "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

So after the movie I watched the local news and the network news, and then I watched the *Solid Gold* dancers, which led right into my eighth beer and a *Muppet Show* rerun, my ninth beer and *Dynasty*, my tenth beer and some country-music awards show. Then came the news again and a *Rockford Files* rerun, and it was too damn late to work, and besides I was running out of beer. I watched a movie in which George Peppard had amnesia, and another put together from episodes of the old *Lone Ranger*, because I loved Clayton Moore's voice. I swallowed the last mouthful of the last beer, and then I congratulated myself on my perfect timing: it was now time to go to bed. Being a writer wasn't so bad. After all, I got to make my own hours. I staggered only a little as I felt my way down the dark hall to the bathroom.



I would lie awake for a few minutes, thinking over the hitch that had popped up in my story; my subconscious would probably solve the problem by morning. I would begin the day ready to tackle the rest of the story. I could have the whole thing finished by lunchtime, and the word processor would type it out in minutes. It would be in the mail Thursday afternoon.

I woke up Thursday morning refreshed after a sound night's sleep. I went to the bathroom and stared at my reflection in the mirror. I decided not to bother shaving; I wondered if the great writers of modern literature started their days like this. Did Graham Greene look for excuses to postpone his work? Did Thomas Pynchon watch the *Solid Gold* dancers? Did John Updike shave every morning?

I went to the refrigerator and remembered that there wasn't any beer; I'd have to skip breakfast. I'd run out at lunchtime and buy a couple of six-packs. I rubbed my face with one hand as I slowly eased my way toward the office. The damn computer was still there, and I regarded it balefully, the way I used to regard my dormant typewriter. "It's magic time," I muttered. I dropped into my chair and read what was written on the screen.

"Oh, Jimmy," cried Celeste, "you won't ever have to wish for anything again!"

That didn't sound right. The line didn't even ring a bell with me. I was sure that I'd left my characters in some kind of painful dilemma. That's why I'd wasted the whole previous day, because I didn't know how to fix it. Of course, I'd been a little drunk when I went to bed; it looked as if I'd gotten up during the night and finished the story in a burst of energy and creative brilliance. Maybe I should consider working drunk more often.

I was just a little annoyed that my inebriated self had changed Charlie Edelman back into Jim Collins. I repeated the editing procedure I'd learned the day before, and once more Charlie Edelman was the hero of the story. I ran it all back to where I'd abandoned it during the afternoon, and read everything that I'd done during the night. It was now a terrific story, and Steinschlager would be pleased. Of course, it was a different story than the one I'd foreseen: it went in an entirely different direction. My drunken self had evidently become romantic; in the finished version, Edelman won both Celeste and a better job from her father before he lost his supernatural powers. It was a very amusing story, if

obviously derivative. It was no longer a satire of Wells's story, but perhaps neither Steinschlager nor the readers would be familiar enough with the original to complain. By the end of the piece, I had a clear picture of my protagonist: he was the young James Stewart. To make it perfect, Celeste was the young June Allyson. It would have made a great Frank Capra movie.

There was nothing left to do but direct the machine to type out the pages. I loaded white bond paper into the tractor feed, entered the appropriate commands, and the printer began chattering to itself. It would be finished in a few minutes; time enough to run to the store for necessary supplies. Beer, that is, and a couple of frozen pizzas.

When I returned, there was a message on my answering machine. It had been Steinschlager again, calling from New York. I looked up his number—editors always assumed I knew them by heart—and called back collect. "Hello, Rocky," I said. "The story's done."

"I'm glad to hear that, Sandy. Listen, did you write it on your new word processor?"

"I started it on the typewriter, but I finished it on the computer. Why?"

There was a brief pause. "Do you have a modem?"

"Uh huh." A modem is a phone coupler that hooks a computer up to another computer. I can use data bases all around the country that way, so I don't have to run down to the library to look up every single fact.

"Good," said Steinschlager. "You know, you don't have to type the story at all. You can use the modem to deliver the story to our computer over the telephone lines."

I was suddenly struck by the possibilities. Thanks to the sci-fi marvels of electronics, a story might never exist on paper until it was finally printed in the magazine; and because the magazine was itself available on microfilm and microfiche, it might never exist on paper at all. "How do I do that?" I asked.

Steinschlager gave me a few instructions. "You just use the modem and punch the number for our computer. Then you enter those commands, and the machines do the rest."

"I didn't think it would be so simple," I said.

"And you don't have to use up your good typing paper; you don't have to make copies of the story; and you don't have to go to the post office."

"That will save me somewhere between five and ten dollars a story. This computer will pay for itself faster than I expected."

"Great, Sandy. Now hang up, call our computer, and transmit the story. I'll get to read it in about ten minutes, instead of five days from now."

"Okay, Rocky," I said, "thanks a lot." He hung up. The word processor had finished printing out the story; now I could just put that copy in my file cabinet, instead of sending it off to New York. I glanced through the pages. They were perfect: margins just as I wanted them, twenty-seven lines to the page, my name and the page number at the top of each sheet. The only thing that I could find to complain about was that somehow Jim Collins had once again replaced Charlie Edelman as the protagonist. It just meant that I hadn't performed the editing procedure correctly. There was still a lot to learn about my machine.

I considered the situation for a moment. I didn't really care *what* the main character's name was. I decided to leave it as it was, rather than fiddle with the computer's memory. Who knew? I might accidentally do something horrible, like wiping out the whole story; then I'd have to start from scratch. Steinschlager wouldn't like that at all. I called New York collect, and when the editorial assistant accepted the charges and put the telephone in her modem, I put my own phone in my modem. Then I ordered my machine to give the story to the publisher's machine. It was quick and easy and free of charge. I began to get enthusiastic about The Computer Age.

I celebrated the delivery of the story by watching a couple of soap operas, a game show, and the noon news. Then I watched John Payne and Virginia Mayo in a lousy western, a *Happy Days* rerun, and a *Laverne and Shirley* rerun. Then it was time for the evening news.

It took a massive effort of will not to watch the news again. I swung my feet down to the floor and stood up. I felt pretty good, the cumulative effect of several beers and my success of the morning. I decided that I would do a little more work in the evening. I had an idea for another short story; if I finished it in a couple of days, and if Steinschlager liked it, the money would pay for some more computer equipment I wanted. I went into my office and sat at the console. I stared at the blank green screen. I was tempted for an instant to play a video game instead, but my professional discipline asserted itself. Then I noticed that there

were messages on my telephone answering machine. I played them back.

The first message was from Cooperman, my collaborator on a series of heroic fantasy novels. "Sorry to hear you're sick, Sandy," came Cooperman's high-pitched voice. "Take your time getting better, the book can wait. I've finished Chapter Eleven and will mail it this afternoon."

I wondered what the hell Cooperman meant by that. I wasn't sick. The only recuperation I had done had been from occasional hangovers. Someone had apparently started a rumor that I'd been ill; rumors popped up all the time, and they were very hard to squash.

The second caller had been Steinschlager. "Great story, Sandy. We'll send the check soon." That was cheerful news.

The third message was from my ex-wife. "Sandy? This is Bea. I heard you were sick; do you need anything? Call me and let me know how you're doing. I *know* you; you'll be up and around real soon."

I was dismayed. I didn't know what I could do about the rumor except call everyone in my address book and tell them I wasn't sick. I was irritated, but I calmed myself down and began the new story. It was called "Let's Be Frank," and was about a guy who wakes up to find two alien minds inexplicably and snottily inhabiting his body with him. I didn't know if I should do the story straight or make it funny. I'd let my creativity decide that. I hadn't actually exercised my creativity much lately.

The sun went down beyond the glass doors in my office, and the nighthawks made their shrill calls as they swooped for insects. The air became pleasantly cool, and I decided that I'd worked enough for one day. I left the story after writing the first six pages. The main character, Frank, had been introduced to the two aliens, had thrown out the possibility that he was merely crazy, and was about to try to get rid of them. Of course, he wouldn't be able to. He had to fail amusingly two or three times before the climax and the ending. I swallowed the remaining Guinness in my bottle and stretched. All in all, it had been a good day profitably spent. I would reward myself with another few hours of television. It was Thursday night; that meant *Hill Street Blues*.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, with the house so quiet that I was awakened by the sound of the air conditioning coming on, I realized that I could not get back to sleep. I tried

all the relaxing exercises I knew; I relaxed my body bit by bit, starting with my toes. I did not fall asleep. I tried again, starting with my scalp and going down. I tried relaxing in alphabetical order. Nothing worked. Frustrated, tired, and wide awake, I reached out and switched on the lamp beside my bed. I thought that if I read for a while, I'd get sleepy; that didn't help either.

At last I decided that as long as I was awake, I might as well work. I supposed that the same thing had happened to me the night before; I was just unable to remember it. I went into the office and sat down at the keyboard. I read the last paragraph of "Let's Be Frank" on the screen.

"Oh, thank goodness!" cried Frank, overjoyed. "Alone at last!"

Because I didn't really recall what came next, I paged back a little way and was startled to find that the story was now twenty pages long, and rather obviously complete. I knew I'd only written six pages. Where had the other fourteen pages come from? Had I gotten out of bed already that night? It was only two o'clock in the morning; I couldn't have written fourteen pages and not remembered it. And I didn't even know how this story was going to end. As I read it, I was pleased by the cleverness of the writing. It was a good little story, and Steinschlager would surely buy it. I just wished I knew where it had come from.

I decided to try an experiment. I made a note to myself in my notebook: *Have begun new short story, "The Arms Race."* I intended to make such a notation whenever I added to the story, and I planned to take three or four days to finish it. I wrote the first paragraph.

Dr. Raymond Sanchez hurried to the conference, his white labcoat streaming behind him like a banner. He was young and handsome, but his face was set in a worried frown. He had just made a terrible discovery, one that would have serious effects on the safety of the whole world.

At this point, I had no idea in hell who Dr. Sanchez was, who the people at the conference were, or what the terrible discovery might be. I had just set up a situation and was betting that my innate resourcefulness would make something of it. I added to the notation *2:20 a.m. Story so far—1st paragraph.* Then I went into the kitchen, got out a bottle from my liquor cabinet, and made myself a double gin and tonic. That would help ease me back to sleep.

When I got up the next morning, I felt wonderful. I felt like meeting the challenge of the new short story, where it was going, whatever it might turn into. I sat down at the word processor and was dismayed once more. The new story was finished, just as "Let's Be Frank" had also been finished during the night. There were no more notations to indicate that I'd written it later that night. I began to worry: it was as if the computer were doing the writing on its own; but I knew that was impossible. It was a little spooky, though. I decided to call the salesman who'd sold me the equipment.

The salesman was out of the office, but a secretary told me that my call would be returned as soon as possible. "Well," I thought, "there's no point in trying to work until I find out what's going on here." So I watched Australian-rules football on the cable and *Fraggle Rock* and switched back to the network for *Ryan's Hope* (this was after Ryan's bar had been rebuilt and Sydney, Max's old mistress, was plotting her revenge on him). Then my doorbell rang.

It was the salesman. "Mr. Courane?" he said. "I'm Jack Horvath, from The Floppy Shoppe."

"You didn't have to make a special trip here," I said. "I just wanted to ask a couple of questions."

"Well," said Horvath, following me to the office, "I dialed your number, but I got a recording that said your line had been disconnected."

I was startled. "It shouldn't be. I paid my bill two weeks ago."

"Maybe they're just doing some work in the neighborhood, and there's a temporary shutdown of service."

"They still should have notified me," I said.

He indicated my word processor. "Are you having hardware trouble?"

"I'm not exactly sure what the problem is, to tell you the truth. There are programs that let the computer invent its own art designs, aren't there?"

"There are programs that generate patterns," said Horvath. "I don't know if you'd go as far as to call it art. I guess it's in the eye of the beholder."

I nodded. "And there are programs that let the computer write poetry and fiction, aren't there?"

"That's the same sort of thing, randomly chosen words and phrases. They produce images just from their order on the page,



but I wouldn't call it literature, myself."

I began to feel a little foolish. "I don't suppose there's some sort of built-in thing in the word-processing program I'm using that would enable the computer to turn out complete short stories? I think it wrote two stories, beginning to end, last night. On its own."

Horvath laughed. "That's impossible, Mr. Courane."

"I kind of thought it was. I had a story partially written when I went to bed last night. About two a.m. I got up and came in here, and the story was finished. I started a second story—actually, I only wrote a single paragraph—and this morning that story was finished, too. I couldn't have done all that work and not remember it."

It looked as if Horvath was trying hard not to laugh again. "It just couldn't do that, Mr. Courane. These machines are just sophisticated office equipment. Your computer could no more create its own short stories than, say, your electric pencil sharpener could. If the stories were finished this morning, it's because you were sleepwalking or sleepwriting or something. Your situation sounds a bit like the old shoemaker and the elves; don't credit the machine. You should have called a doctor this morning, instead of me." I saw him glance into my wastebasket, where there was a large brown jumble of empty Guinness bottles.

That made me angry, but I kept my mouth closed. In a moment my hostility subsided. "Maybe you're right. Thanks for coming out here."

Horvath smiled. "There isn't anything else about the computer that's giving you any trouble?"

"No, it's fine. It's just fine."

"Well, then, good day, Mr. Courane." The salesman departed with a great gag to tell the others at his store. I was glad that I hadn't told anyone else about what had happened; I would be the laughingstock of the entire publishing industry.

I had to think for a moment about Horvath's suggestion. The only rational explanation was that I had, indeed, been sleepwriting. I tried to accept that, but I just couldn't; for one thing, there hadn't been sufficient time for me to write two entire short stories in final draft between bedtime and morning. I just can't work that fast. And I didn't want to believe that I could write better unconscious than awake. I'd rather accept a supernatural explanation.



I didn't feel like working at all now. I didn't feel like watching more soap operas, game shows, and old movies, either. I decided to pay a visit to the telephone company and find out why my service had been cut off. I had to stand in a long line there; when it was my turn, I was told simply that the main office had received a call from someone saying he was Sandor Courane, requesting that my number be disconnected and a final bill sent out.

"It must have been some practical joker," I said. "I do *not* want my service disconnected. I need my phone for business calls."

"I understand," said the service representative. "You'll have full service restored before five o'clock this evening."

"Thank you." It was about half past twelve; I decided to go to a movie and kill the afternoon. I stood in line again to get into the big release of the summer season, a science fiction picture that depended more on loud, sudden orchestral chords than on plot logic. I admired it greatly; I try to do the very same thing in my own stories.

After the movie I had two Big Macs, fries, and a vanilla shake. Then I dropped a coin into a pay telephone and called my phone number, to see if my service had been restored yet. The phone rang once, and then my answering machine responded. "Hello," said the recording, "this is Sandor Courane's residence. Mr. Courane is gravely ill and cannot come to the phone. If you leave your name and number, Mr. Courane will return your call as soon as he is able.

Beep.

I hung up quickly. I hadn't made that recording. I stared at the pay phone, frightened. It had been my own voice, all right, but I hadn't made that recording.

All the way home, I fought off an anxiety attack threatening on the horizon, like a summer thunderstorm. I had no simple explanation for what was happening; I didn't even have a complex explanation. I only knew that I hadn't written those stories, and I hadn't made that recording. Perhaps the computer salesman had been right, and I ought to see a physician. Maybe all the years of excess imagination and creativity had worn my mental gears smooth. Maybe they were beginning to slip.

I punched the button for the elevator in my apartment building. It lit up and went out; that meant the car was already on the ground floor. I unlocked the door and stepped off into space. I fell fifteen feet to the bottom of the elevator shaft. I

screamed in pain as I realized that I'd broken my legs in the fall. The door closed behind me, high above me, plunging me into absolute darkness. Then I heard the racket of the elevator's motor; the car was coming down. There was no place to hide. I screamed again, briefly.

A few days later, the telephone rang in the office. "Hello," said the voice on the answering machine, "this is Sandor Courane. The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated. I'm sorry I can't come to the telephone in person, but if you leave your name and number, I'll return your call as soon as possible."

Beep.

"Sandy? This is Rocky in New York. I love both of the stories. I think I'll get someone to do a cover painting around 'The Arms Race.' Absolutely brilliant. Your checks are in the mail. Please send more stories. Just keep 'em coming."

I disconnected the telephone, then took care of a few small chores. I called my bank's computer and transferred money to the utilities company's account to pay the electric bill, and I did the same to pay the rent on the apartment for another month. Celebrating the sale of the two short stories, I decided to try something more ambitious, more challenging. My cursor paused for a moment, as if I needed a moment to consider how to begin. White letters flicked across my green face: *When Yesterday Disappeared*, A Novel of the Time Patrol, #1 in a series by Sandor Courane.

Then I really got down to work.

# The Deed of the Deft-Footed Dragon

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

What could a launderer,  
late of the middle kingdom,  
*possibly* do to repay the wealthy daughter  
of a round-eye usurer?

It was frightfully hot in the streets. Most of the shops were cooler, particularly since the day was fairly young, but some of the shops were even hotter, and behind the beaded curtain in one of them a man was taking advantage of the concealment thus offered to work stripped to the waist; and even so the sweat poured off his torso and on to his thin cotton trousers. He did not think of complaining about the weather, sent as it was by the inscrutable decree of Heaven. Still, it was necessary to admit that it did slow his work down. Not that he toiled one hour the less at the washtubs, not that he toiled one hour the less at the ironing-board. Man was born to toil, and—brutal though the savages were among whom he toiled—it was almost inevitable that eventually he would have saved one thousand dollars: then he might retire to his native country and live at ease. However, the heat. And the sweat. What slowed his work down was that from time to time he was obliged to wipe his hands dry and carefully fold the garments he had ironed; in order to avoid staining them with his perspiration he was obliged to stand far away as he folded: *this* slowed the work down. *Mei-yo fah-dze*, there was nothing to be done about it; he filled his mouth with water and carefully sprayed a small amount onto the garment on the ironing-board; then he picked up a hot iron from the stove and made it hiss upon the cloth.

"It is unfortunate about the girl-child's absence," one of his countrymen then present observed.

"So." The water had evaporated. Another mouthful. Another spray. Another hiss.

"She justified her rice by folding the garments while you ironed."

"So."

This countryman was called Wong Cigar Fellow. He rolled the cigars themselves, then he peddled them to others. Sometimes he carried other things for sale from his basket—these varied—but always the cigars; hence his name. "It is said that once you pursued a far more honored craft than this one, far away in the Golden Mountain City." The man said nothing. The pedlar said, "All men know this is so, despite your great modesty. Do you not regret the change?"

"*Mei-yo fah-dze.*"

He puffed his cheeks with water, sprayed, ironed.

Wong Cigar Fellow made as though to rise, settled again. "It is too bad about Large Pale Savage Female."

The name on the shop was On Lung. Sometimes this caused the savage natives to laugh their terrible laugh. "Hey, One Lung," they would say, in their voices like the barking dogs. "Hey, One Lung, which Lung is it? Hey? No savvy? No tickee, no shirtee, hey?" And, baring huge yellow teeth, would laugh, making a sound like *hop, hop, hop*.

The wash-man dried his hands, dried his body, quickly packed up the shirt and, holding it at arms' length before he could begin to sweat heavily again, deftly folded it around a piece of cardboard.

"Ah, how swiftly the girl-child folded shirts."

"*Mei-yo fah-dze.*" He took another shirt and spread it on the ironing board; then asked, indifferently, "What large pale savage female do you refer to?"

"Large Pale Savage Female, so we all call her. Eyes the ugly color of a sky on a bright day."

"Do not all the savages, male and female, have such ugly eyes?"

Wong Cigar Fellow was inclined to be argumentative. "No, not at all, all. Some have eyes the color of smoke. Some have eyes of mixed colors. And some even have eyes the colors of human beings' eyes. Ha! Now I know how you will remember! Did she not, as they say, 'teach a class'? On the morning of the first day of their week, in one of their temple-buildings which they

erect with no thought to *feng-shui*, wind and water and other influences as revealed by geomancy—Yes. The one who taught fairy tales and savage songs to the children of our laundrymen, and did not the girl-child attend?—as why not? it may be that their strange god or gods have authority here in savage territory, so far from the Kingdom in the Middle of the World—besides: girls . . . one gives them away, merely; after eating one's rice for many years, they go off and live in another human's house . . ."

On Lung uttered an exclamation. Yes! Now he recognized Large Pale Savage Female. Not in the least pausing or even slowing his pace, he listened while Wong Cigar Fellow spoke on.

The father of Large Pale Savage Female had formerly been, it was said, a merchant. Next, by cleverly putting his money out at usury, he had gotten a great fortune and owned estates and houses and documents called stocks and bonds which also gained him money. His wife having died, he had taken a concubine. "They call her a wife, but she has had no children, how can she be a wife?" and between concubine and daughter there had grown enmity . . .

"Even in our own country one hears similar stories," chattered Wong Cigar Fellow. "Still—why does the Old Father not adopt, say, a cousin's son? Marry off the daughter to—"

On Lung said, "Who would marry her? She has such big feet?"

"True. That is true. And even while it is true that the savages never bind the feet of their girl-children and even prevent us from doing so, still, even for a savage, Large Pale Savage Female has big feet. Well!" This time he really got up and grasped the pole of his carrying-basket. "It is said that the second wife so-called is gradually obtaining all the old man's property and that, not content with this, has made plans to—as they say—make a will in her favor. He is old and when he dies, what will become of Large Pale Savage Female? She must either go and play for trade in a sing-song house, or stay at home at the second wife's (or concubine's) beck and call, toiling like a servant. It is to drink bitter tea.—Farewell, Deft-footed Dragon. It may be cooler by evening."

On Lung worked on in his steamy back-room. "One Lung," indeed! The savages had no knowledge that *Lung*, besides being one of the Hundred Names, also meant *Dragon*. It was his success as a warrior which had gained him that full name. Ah, the war! Then came a day when the high military council had summoned him to their chamber. "A treaty of peace has been signed," said

the spokesman, "and one of the terms of the treaty—the others of course need not concern you—is that all such warriors are at once to leave the Golden Mountain City and depart for distant places. These august personages would not leave you without means of earning rice money in savage parts, of course. Here is your passage-ticket on the fire-wagon. It is to a town called Stream-by-a-Cataract, in a distant province whose name means nothing and the syllables of which no human mouth can pronounce. Here are fifty silver dollars. The savages are so filthy that they are obliged to make constant changes of clothing, so you will never lack employment in the laundry which it has been arranged for you to assume. Therefore lay down your heart, Deft-footed Dragon, and never worry about your rice-bowl."

The girl-child (her mother, being weak, had taken a fever and died quickly) was indeed of great use in folding shirts; the savages called her Lily Long. Indeed, after a while, he had found comfort in the child's company: perhaps it was not his destiny to have sons. Because she was needed to fold shirts, because she was rather shy, because there were anyway no children nearby to play with, "Lily" (it was, for a marvel, easy to say; often he said it) spent much of her time in the shop. Also she was useful in chattering with the savages, none of whom, of course, could speak, when they came with shirts and other garments. The farthest away she ever went, in fact, was to the so-called "school" held in the worship place in the morning of the first day of their week . . . as though it were in any way essential to divide the lunar months into smaller quantities. . . . Sometimes she told him something of the strange tales and stranger songs learned there. Now and then he laughed. She was sometimes very droll. It was a pity she was so weak; her mother, of course, had also been so.

Almost as she entered he had recognized Large Pale Savage Female from the descriptions he had heard. "Lily was not at Sunday School today. Is she ill?" From the rear of the shop came the call of *Miss—Miss—* In the woman went. "Why, Lily, you are burning up. Let me put my lips to your brow . . . you have a terrible fever. Wait . . . wait . . ." Well did On Lung know a fever. Had the pills from the savages' apothecary helped? No they had not: therefore he was brewing an infusion of dried pomegranate rind, very good for restoring the proper balance of yin and yang, hot and cold.—In another moment, out rushed Large Pale Savage Female, swinging her mantle over her fleshy

shoulders: it seemed but a second before she was back again, and this time she held the mantle in her arms as though she were swaddling a child; curious, he followed her behind the beaded curtain.

Curiosity gave way almost to alarm: Large Pale Savage Female at once set the mantle on a table and, picking up a cold iron, proceeded to strike it repeatedly upon the garment and its contents. Very nearly, it sounded as though bones were being cracked.

"Desist, 'Miss-Miss,' " he exclaimed. "That is clearly a costly garment as befits the daughter of a respected usurer and rack-rent landlord, and I fear it may be damaged, and the blame laid on me; desist!"

Smack! Smack! *Smack!*

In a moment the mantle was flung open, inside lay a mass of crushed ice, quicker than he could move to prevent it she had snatched from the pile first one clean wrinkled shirt and then another, tumbled the crushed ice into each and wrapped it up like a sausage; then she set one on each side of the small, feverish body.

"Doesn't that feel better now?"

The female child murmured something very low, but she smiled as she reached up and took the large pale paw in her tiny golden hand.

Large Pale Savage Female came often, came quite often, came several times a day; Large Pale Savage Female brought more ice and more ice; she bathed the wasted little frame in cooled water many times, she brought a savage witch-doctor with the devil-thing one end of which goes in the ears and the other end upon the breast; also he administered more pills. Large Pale Savage Female fed broth to the sick child—in short, she could not have done more if she were caring for a husband's grandfather.

Afterward, Wong Cigar Fellow commented, "Needless to say that I would have gone had it been a boy; although Buddhists have said that even the death of a son is no more than the passage of a bird across the empty sky, who can go quite that far? Forget the matter in much toil and eventually you will have accumulated the thousand dollars which will enable you to return to the Kingdom in the Middle of the World and live at ease forever."

Only On Lung himself had been present at the burial of the girl-child. He, that is, and Large Pale Savage Female whose much

care had not prevailed, plus the priest-savage she had brought along. It was a wet, chill autumn day; the bitter wind had scattered rain and leaves . . . golden leaves . . . henceforth the tiny ghost would sip in solitude of the Yellow Springs beneath the earth. It was astonishing how very painful the absence of the small person was found. One would not indeed have thought it possible.

The heat had become intolerable; he thought of that sudden illness which was compared to the tightening of a red-hot band about the head: nonsense: he was still upright; merely the place seemed very odd, suddenly. Seemed without meaning, suddenly. Its shapes seemed to shift. It had no purpose. No wonder he was no longer there, was outside, was moving silently from one silent alley to another, on his shoulder the carrying pole of the two laundry-baskets, one at each end. No one was about, and, if anyone were, no one would have noted his presence: merely a Chinaman, which is to say a laundryman, picking up and leaving off shirts. No one. Everything was very sudden, now. He had hidden pole and baskets behind a bush. He had slipped through a space where a board was missing from a fence. He was in a place where wood was stored and split. He had a glimpse of someone who he knew. He must avoid such a one—indeed all others. Silently his slippered feet flew up the stairs. A voice droned in a room. Droned on and on. And on. "... come when I call you, hey, miss? Miss, Miss Elizabeth? Beneath you, is it? We'll see if you'll come when I call you pretty soon," the voice droned on. "I say, 'We'll see if you'll come when I call you pretty soon, miss.' Wun't call me, 'Mother,' hey, miss? Well, even if I be Mr. Borden's second wife, I be his lawful-wedded wife, him and me has got some business at the bank and the lawyer's pretty soon today, you may lay to that, yes, miss, you may lay to that; we'll see if you ain't a-going to come when I call you after that, and come at my very beck and call and do as I tell you must do, for if you don't you may go somwheres else and you may git your vittles somwheres else, too, though darned if I know where that may be, I have got your father wrapped around my little finger, miss, miss, yes, I say yes, I shall lower your proud head, miss," the hateful, nasal voice droned on.

So! This was she: the childless concubine of the father of Large Pale Savage Female! *She*, the one who planned to assume the rule of family property and cast out the daughter of the first wife? In this heat-stricken, insance, and savage world only the



practice of fidelity and the preservation of virtue could keep a man's heart from being crushed by pain. He who had been known (and rightfully known) as The Deft-Footed Dragon, the once-reknewed and most-reknewed hatchet-man of the great Ten Tongs, hefted his weapon and slipped silently into the room ...

*Having trouble finding*

# NIGHT CRY

THE MAGAZINE OF TERROR

*at the newsstand where you  
shop regularly?*

The person to get in touch with is your local magazine wholesaler. If you know who he is, call him. Let him know that you've been looking for *Night Cry*, and let him know that you couldn't find it. Ask him what newsstands in your area *do* carry the magazine. Be sure to tell him where it was you couldn't find it.

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Barbara Markey  
Office Assistant, *Night Cry*  
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New York, NY 10017

# Metempsychosis

by BENJAMIN GLEISSER

Callie needed it *real* bad;  
bad enough to do something rash.  
He had a gun in his pocket, but his hands  
kept shaking too bad for him to use it.

*Demons have shown him the end of the world ...*

I'm sitting in a window booth in the McDonald's at 107th and Euclid watching without seeing the traffic. Before me is an empty cup; I've finished the coffee and can't spare the change for another. Luke's gonna be by any minute and I need every penny for him—even though what I got isn't enough.

My hands, in my lap beneath the table, are quivering. I need a fix and I need it bad. If Luke's in a good mood maybe he'll let me have it for half if I promise to deliver the rest tomorrow. But I doubt it. Luke's not my pal, he's a businessman, just like the guy in a white shirt and tie behind the McDonald's counter. Ask him for a free Big Mac, tell him you haven't eaten in two days. See what he says.

Luke slips into my booth, his leather coat rustling as he sits. "Got the jack, Callie?" His mocking smile shows sharp white teeth. He likes knowing there's a white man willing to dance whenever he snaps his fingers. And I dance. I dance and sweat and tremble for him, and if I had to get down and lick the bottoms of his shoes for my dime packet of white powder, I would.

"How you doing, Luke? You're looking good—"

"C'mon, Callie, don't try selling me no wolf tickets. You got the money or not?"

"I ... I got some ... but I'm a little short. Just a couple bucks. Maybe I could give you the rest later?"

His laugh is deep and bounces off the walls. A family of five in the next booth turn their heads. "See you around, Callie," Luke says, getting up.

"Wait a minute!" I grab his arm and his scowl flashes kill. I jerk my hand away and lower my head in supplication. Humble myself. Grovel before my man. He loves it.

Looking up into his eyes, I quietly say, "Meet me here later. Around five, okay? I'll have the rest then. I promise. I got connections—"

"You got nothing," he sneers, sitting. "What you gonna do, Callie, knock off another pizza joint? Maybe you gonna take a bakery for a little spare change? You nothing, man, nothing. Shit, I don't know why I bother with trash like you."

"Luke, I'll get it later. But you gotta give me a little more time. Please! That's all I need, a little more time!"

He grabs my hand, holds it out. "Look at this, man. Look at it. You can't hold a gun with this hand. You try to rob someone, he gonna laugh in your face. And you want me to come back at five? You ain't gonna last another hour. You be kissing the gutter by five."

Luke slowly stands, straightens his leather coat. I gnaw my lower lip. Time stops as he stares at me. A hint of a smile wrinkles a corner of his mouth. He knows I'll get the money or die trying.

"Five," he says, spins around, and quickly strides out.

Walking down Euclid Avenue, I realize I'm screwed. My gun's in my pocket but my head's in the wrong place to try taking anyone down. I'm sick inside, my guts are smoldering with a slow burn that's quickly picking up speed. I wanna go back to my mattress and hold my stomach and curl into a ball. But I gotta get some cash. Quick.

Heading down toward the pond, the first jolt hits me. I fall on the grass and clench my teeth to keep from screaming. There's people nearby, I feel their eyes burning into me. I wish I was invisible. I wish I was dead.

"Brother, are you all right?"

The pain passes. An oval, pink face hovers over me.

"Yeah. Fine." My head clears as I push myself into a sitting position. The man crouching over me stands up. It's one of those Hare Krishnas that's always dancing around University Circle. He

wears a brown robe and a bulging purse hangs from a string around his neck. I hope it contains money.

"Perhaps I can help you, brother."

I chuckle once. "Perhaps."

He smiles warily. "Come with me to our temple. Let us cleanse your spirit. Cleanse the *karma* of your sin. Would you like to be cleansed?"

"Yeah. Sure," I answer, feigning interest, even though the only thing that interests me is the money bag around his neck.

"In this age of *Kali-yuga*," he continues, "when one sows a sinful seed, the seed grows to fruition unless the individual cleanses himself. Either you cleanse yourself by giving duty to the Lord or you suffer through *maya*."

"My what?"

He grins, offers me a hand. I grasp his hand and pull myself up.

"*Maya*. A spiritual illusion caused by a desire to possess material objects. *Maya* is like a disguise you carry around; as your *karma*, your frame of mind, changes, so does your soul. As your soul transmigrates from one body to the next and struggles for existence—"

"Hey," I say, headache pains scratching inside my skull, "I gotta get going—"

"But you need not suffer through your present *karma*. You can change yourself. When Krishna appears, he will vanquish the demons, save his devotees and commence a new age of enlightenment—"

"Look, man, I'm a junkie. I don't need enlightenment, I need a fix. You got some money I can have?" I fondle the gun in my pocket. "What's in that purse around your neck?"

"Japa beads."

"Beads. Great. I'll see you."

Angrily, I turn and walk. He dogs my steps. "I offer you purification, salvation, the chance to join our order—"

"The hell with salvation and your order."

"*Asuras!*" he snaps. "Demon! Even if I live in the darkest regions of a forest—"

"Shut up. Go away."

"—I shall be accompanied by Krishna and he will give me all protection."

"Shut up!"

*"Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare—"*

Something shatters in my head. Suddenly I'm bending over him, beating his round head with the butt of my gun. His pink scalp cracks with fissures of blood and I can't stop hitting, hitting, hitting—

A whistle. Footsteps slapping the pavement. I look up, a dozen brown-robed Krishnas and two cops are running at me. I dash up the stairs, run up Euclid past the McDonald's. People stare at me and point their fingers.

Gotta hide. I scramble into the rubble of buildings recently torn down for the construction of Cleveland Clinic and stumble through formations of sandstone storefronts, reinforced concrete blocks and cement dust. A shiny piece of glass reflecting the sun catches my eyes. A mirror. Or a piece of some storefront window.

Is that me looking back from the glass? Blue-black lines around my sunken eyes, hollow cheeks, three-day stubble, stringy hair over my forehead ... I look like a walking piece of hell. How did I ever become a smack-head? It seems like another lifetime ago when I had so much: friends, a lover, a car, a good job ...

"Hey you! Freezel!"

The glass shows a blue figure over my shoulder, a glinting metal object in his outstretched hand. My eyes sting with tears that trickle down my cheeks. My life is over. I resign myself to death. Cocking my gun, I close my eyes and whirl around.

A shot explodes, tears into my chest, throws me backward ... falling, my body tingles with a thousand pinpricks. I feel myself floating ...

**T**he dizziness passes and I open my eyes. Night.

Night? I whirl around, trying to focus on where I am. The streetcorner signs read 105th and Euclid, but ...

Instead of rubble I'm staring into, it's a glass storefront, a Walgreen's Drug Store. Around me the streets are alive with people, more people than I've ever seen in this area. And they're white people, affluent-looking white people instead of the unemployed and poor blacks that usually haunt this neighborhood.

And the businesses—there's a Greyhound station where I'd had a cup of coffee not more than an hour ago, a large dark sandstone Cleveland Trust building, an edifice of imitation logs announcing the Cabin Club, an old-time movie marquee flashing Keith's 105th

RKO . . . JANE WYMAN, *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*.

My reflection shows me wearing a thin-lapelled jacket and a narrow tie. Where did these clothes come from? Where am I? How did I get here?

Two young men dressed in clothes similar to mine stand beside me gazing into the window. They run their fingers over their bristly military haircuts.

"Eddie got his notice," one says, inspecting the side of his nose. "Goin' to Korea."

"Poor bastard," the other replies, adjusting his tie. "Friggin' army wouldn't take me. Said I had flat feet."

The first brushes his hand over his friend's hair. "To match your flat head."

They laugh, stop, stare at me. "What're you looking at?" the first asks, his upper lip curling into a sneer.

Paralyzed, I can't answer.

"Ah, he's a fiend. Look at his eyes. Too many reefers."

My words are a hoarse whisper. "Where am I?"

They laugh loudly, turn and stroll away. Over his shoulder, one jerks his thumb at me and they laugh again.

I walk in a daze and try to comprehend everything around me. Neon signs, well-dressed people, streetcar tracks in the streets, hundreds of happy conversations . . . like a scene from a movie set in the early fifties . . . and those boys talking of going to Korea . . . no, it was impossible . . .

I peer into a place called Lindsay's Sky Bar. A small crowd of people gather behind me and I'm swept with them into the nightclub. A long bar against the back wall is populated with tired-looking drinkers. Rows of tables face a brightly lit stage. On stage, a red-haired woman with a horsey face wears a slinky red dress two sizes too small for her. A combo from somewhere plays and the woman sings with a leery smile:

*Once a month I take a vacation,  
Drive my customers to . . . sheer frustration.  
Live in a house with a little red light,  
Sleep all day and work all night.*

The audience laughs politely and the singer launches into the next verse. A woman wearing a strapless evening gown saunters by, turns her head, and winks. Cold sweat chills my skin.

The blood drains from my head as I stare in shock at the woman sitting at a nearby table. Her dark hair in a page-boy bob, her upturned nose and thin lips—like the old photographs she showed me so often—*my mother*. But those men sitting with her, none of them look like my father ... *My father is serving in Korea!*

One man leans over, kisses my mother's neck. She giggles. My heart thumping madly, I rush to their table and throw the man's arm off my mother's shoulder.

His expression dissolves from surprise to anger. Slowly he rises from his chair. "Just who the hell do you think you are?" he growls, biting every word. His companions snicker.

A burly man grabs me from behind in a bear hug and drags me away. "Stop!" I cry. "Mom! Mom! Help me!"

My mother looks at me with wide, surprised eyes. I struggle uselessly in the arms of the bouncer as he shoves me outside onto the sidewalk. Amid loud laughter I run down the street, knocking into people.

My mother ... those men ... I'd heard whispers as a child late at night. Sinful accusations. My mother's denials. Tears of shame flow from my eyes.

I stop before the Walgreen's window. "What's happening to me?" I whisper to my reflection. "Take me back—"

To where? The bar. I want to go back to that bar and kill those men ... kill that man.... even if it means my death. *Kill that—*

My reflection wavers; I see the three men sitting with my mother. Their heads are oddly triangular, snake heads on long necks that nuzzle her body while their tongues flick over her face, her arms ...

"Stop," I whisper, then I scream. "Stop!"

My fists lash out at the picture. A shrill crash—suddenly I realize I've put my fists through the window. Silence surrounds me. The window glass reflects shocked faces. Blood streams from my wrists. I numb and collapse.

... wake face-down on a cold, cracked sidewalk. My anger rings in my ears as I stagger to my feet. Red shards cut the night sky, reflect on the pane of glass before me. Sounds of glass shattering, screams, fire engines, police sirens, stampeding feet, gunshots ...

I panic, take two steps, and stop. Where am I now? It might

be the same area, but I can't tell ... when...?

Bright red flames jump into the sky while drunken cries of horror and laughter float on the air. Before my eyes is a vision of hell and shadows. Something whizzes past my head and the glass storefront explodes.

It's some kind of riot I'm in, cops and black people with sweat glistening on their faces like chess pieces. Both sides advance, withdraw, taunt ... storefronts are smashed, looters crawl through holes in the glass and toss merchandise into the street. Mannequins robbed of their clothing stand helpless while fires melt them into plastic pools.

I run through the burning streets, dodging scenes of madness. How did I get here? Why am I receiving this kind of torment? Because I'd almost killed that Krishna? My—

*Maya ... karma ... his words come back to me. As your karma, your frame of mind, changes, so does your soul. As your soul transmigrates from one body to the next and struggles for existence—*

I run into an alley between two sandstone buildings to catch my breath. Spray-painted on one wall is "Black power!" and "Remember Fred Hampton!"

"Asssssurassss!" hisses a voice in the air. "Demon!"

I spin around, glancing to the left and right. "Who's there?"

From the shadows, a pair of angry, bloodshot eyes. His smooth, round head reflects the light from a nearby fire and his blood-red lips cut his dark face in two. "I know you. You tried killing one of my brothers." Scowling with a grin, he pulls out a glinting stiletto blade.

"D-don't hurt me."

"Aw no, man, this ain't gonna hurt a bit."

My head is battered by the insanity around me, the cries and shrieks, the sirens and explosions, the screaming in my soul. The man advances slowly, his knife an accusing finger pointed at my heart. I step away and his scowl gives way to a Satanic laugh.

I back against the wall. His knife lunges. I jerk sideways, grab his arm and ram a knee into his stomach. We fall to the ground and wrestle amid the stones and broken glass as feet run past our writhing bodies. Quickly my fist whips out, connects with his jaw. Stunned, he lets go of the knife. I hit his face again and again and—

*—I'm standing over someone, beating his head with the butt of my gun. His pink scalp cracks with fissures of blood and I*



can't stop hitting, hitting, hitting—

"No!" I shriek, a cry drowned out by a police siren.

His hands shoot up, grab my neck. Iron fingers squeeze. With both hands I try prying him away. He grips harder and deep laughter rolls from my chest. My strength drains, I gasp for air. Something shatters red in my head and everything blurs ...

... becomes ...

What? I am something, a lump of clay with a mind; I hear, I think, I reason, I feel outside stimuli. But who am I? Where am I? Swirling images in my mind of violence and destruction ... a voice in the back of my head ... something about cleansing ...

Criss-crossing flags on a streetcorner say 105 and Euclid. Ringing me are tall white buildings like barracks with thousands of windows catching the sunlight. In big black letters, the words CLEVELAND CLINIC hang in the sky.

Milling in the street are people dressed in off-white jumpsuits. Some of them wear shirts stretched tight across their chests as if they are women trying to deny their breasts.

The people look toward a raised platform a block away. Three men sit on the stage while a fourth speaks before a dais. "... and on this momentous day, his honor, the Mayor."

A smattering of applause.

A heavy-set man in a green suit strides up to the dais. "My friends, this is indeed a historic occasion, and I am honored to dedicate Cleveland's newest suburb, the city of Clinic, begun more than a century ago. It does my heart good to know that the arts of healing and peace have not been lost in this time of war ..."

I grab the nearest person's arm, a man/woman with spiked hair and a gold earring. "War? Who's at war?"

"Huh?" the person replies quizzically. "You bopped or something?"

A shorter person turns. "What's the lip-noise, spud, you tangent?"

"The spud's bopped, Trix."

Trix shrugs. "Looks pretty fear and loathing to be bopped."

A sirenlike whistle slices the air. The Mayor stops speaking, everyone scans the sky. "Lert! Lert!" Trix cries, pointing upward. Someone screams. A silvery rod like a pointing finger flies across the heavens and drops suddenly. The crowd scatters. A cluster of

triangular skyscrapers in the distance explodes bright red. A fist of heat slams me against a wall and bathes me with cataclysmic fire. Thousands of shattered windows rain droplets of glass. Sidewalks buckle and hydrants shoot steam into the air. I feel the hair burning on my head, my skin smoldering and bubbling, my flesh dissolving into the ground. There is not even time to repent.

He has seen the end of the world, but he is at peace. It is time to spread the word. He and his brothers and sisters begin the procession to the pond at University Circle and there they will commence *sankirtana*, the public chanting.

He stares with shame at the scars on the head of the brother walking beside him. His shame comes as an inner voice that says he has wronged his brother once. Perhaps in another life. He prays he has atoned for it.

The procession halts momentarily as two policemen carry a stretcher across Euclid Avenue. A body, wrapped in white, lays on the stretcher. The brothers chant a prayer for the man's soul, already transmigrating into a new existence.

One day, you will see the end of the world.

Perhaps in another life.

Peace, friend.



# AMYMONE'S FOOTSTEPS

by GARY A. BRAUNBECK

She'd told David she didn't mind his leaving her alone at night, but that was before the sound of the water had begun to speak to her, to whisper things that made her chest thunder in glorious, murderous expectation.

At last I understood their message:  
They'd just discovered—who knows how—  
The tide was never going out again. . ."  
—E.A. Muir, "The Gulls"

Debra Bishop stood alone on the nightbeach and watched as the ocean returned the pebble she'd thrown out only moments before. Kneeling to pick up the tiny stone, she wondered if everything she ever tried to share or give of herself would be tossed back in her face with the same efflorescent carelessness, but self-pity was never a land in which she journeyed for long, so she stood erect, arched back, and heaved the stone out into the damp night. She pulled a handful of change from her pockets, then—in a superstitious homage to the ancient Egyptian Trinity of Osiris, Isis, and Horus—bowed three times to the moon while making the loneliest of her lonely wishes. Half covered by the sand at her feet she saw the molding remains of a very small starfish, and she found herself wondering if the creature had been washed ashore against its will, or if it was waiting for others like itself to rise from the depths and join it. Somehow the night here made her think this way, and she was beginning to hate it.

"Are you coming in? I gotta get goin'." It was David.

"In a minute."

"The tide will be coming in pretty soon. You're not waiting to try and outrun *that*, are you?"

"Oh, God, no. I'm just ... you know, *thinking*."

"About me?"

"Among other things."

"*Among other things*," he mimicked playfully. "That doesn't make me feel very much wanted."

*As if I don't know the feeling*, she thought.

She stood hugging herself under the moon, looking at the dead starfish, waiting for David to come out and join her before he left. Sea spray lapped her feet. The starfish remained anchored to its spot. There was something so ethereal to the scene she couldn't take her eyes from it. It was a beautiful spot, she had to admit, and she had, after all, told David she didn't mind his leaving her here at nights, but that was before ... *don't think about it, honey*.

She watched as a line of foam crept onto the sand, nearly reaching her feet. The sight made her jump inside so she took a step back and turned, nearly running face-first into David.

"Figures," he said. "I come out and you decide you want to go in. Does wonders for my ego."

"Are you sure you have to go tonight?"

"Come on. You know the only reason we came down here was to see the clubs. If Jim decides to tour the band down here—"

"I know, I know; you'll know which places to try and book. I know how important this is to you and the band, really I do, but we've been here six days and you've only spent one night with me."

"You said you didn't want to come along—"

"And I don't. I know this is technically a business trip, but it would be nice if you could mix it with a little pleasure ... preferably mine."

"Please, Debbie? I know you have to feel bad about staying here alone at night, but I hadn't planned on you coming along in the first place." She smiled and turned back out to face the sea. He was right; her coming along *had* been a last-minute decision, she had no right to feel resentment, but she did. One night, was that too much to ask? Just talk to him about it, you can still talk to him about things. He's the same David, the same guitar player in a rock'n'roll band, talk to him. About love. About loneliness.

About fear.

"Look, this place is really starting to scare me at night. Please don't leave."

"Why don't you come along tonight? I promise you this club has no strippers."

"I promise you this house *will* have a stripper if you stay."

"You don't give up, do you?"

"No, because if I give up I'm going to get angry and you don't like me when I'm angry."

"You're not the same person when you're mad."

"Then stay here and build a fire and tell me stories and get me drunk. I don't make this offer too often, so you'd better jump. Yammer about the trouble you used to get into when you were in the navy, do your stupid W. C. Fields imitation and then make love to me in whatever room you want, I don't care. Just don't leave." He didn't say anything for a moment, and that's when she noticed that he'd dropped something large and silver behind him.

"What's that?" He gave a small, nervous laugh.

"Something that wouldn't help if . . . *why* does this place scare you at night? I think it's beautiful."

"Then why don't you stay here?"

"That's not an answer." That's because there *was* no answer; at least not one he'd accept. What could she say? That after twenty-nine years of living, thirteen of them on her own, she'd suddenly discovered that she didn't like being alone at night? That wouldn't hold water . . . so to speak. Why not the truth? Why not just turn full face toward him and say, "I think the tide is trying to get me!"?

*Because he'd laugh in your face, that's why.*

"You'd never believe me," she said. "Now, what in the hell is that thing?"

"You don't want to know."

"If I didn't want to know I wouldn't have asked. Fess up." He looked at her, shrugged, then walked over and retrieved it.

"It's something I read about in one of your Mark Twain books." He came close and offered it to her. It was a loaf of the zwieback she'd baked the other day, only he'd wrapped it in aluminum foil and stuck a thermometer in it.

"I give up," she said.

"Twain said that if you put some quicksilver in a loaf of bread and float it out on the water, it will stop over the place

where a drowned body is. I was going to ask you about it, trying it out, I mean. I thought it might be kind of fun." Debra shrank away from him *and* it.

"Christ, David! That's morbid!" He turned to face the ocean.

"I told you you wouldn't want to know."

*Please don't do what I think you're going to do.*

He arched back and threw the zweiback loaf out to the waters. It soared like a metallic football for what seemed like a mile, then splashed down far from shore, but not so far that Debra couldn't see it under the moonlight.

"Why did you *do* that?"

"Why not?" He moved close to kiss her. She turned her head and pushed him away. Revulsion and fear merged as one within her, and there was no longer any room for tenderness.

"If you care anything about me, please stay."

"Don't pull that number on me. I've seen you out there when I leave at night. You walk up and down this beach like it's your own private island and personal domain. Don't you dare pull something so petty as 'If you love me,' because it won't work! Now . . . I'm going. Are you coming along this time or not?"

"Go to hell."

David said nothing for several moments, then whirled around and began walking away.

"If you really get scared call the club down the road and have me paged. I'll be there all evening." He vanished up the dune by their cabin, leaving her alone on the nightbeach with the moon above, the tide only thirty minutes away, and his horrible corpse finder still floating in the distance. Just as she turned to walk back to the cabin she caught sight of something squirming in the sand a few feet away and took three hesitant steps toward it. What she saw struggling in the sand made her want to call out after David, but another, stronger part, a part that was giving itself over to fear's silent fascination, would not allow her to make a sound, even with her harsh—and now regretted words—ringing in her ears.

There were now two starfish lying on the beach.

She walked hurriedly back to the cabin, slammed shut the sliding glass doors, and leaned against the frame. Her heart was trying to squirt through her ribs and bounce off the far wall, but through some buried reserve of self control she prevented herself from giving over to her fear. She pressed her weight against the door, her barrier from the waves, and took several deep breaths.

Maybe this was just overreaction, a delayed paranoia from childhood, a budding, warped form of xenophobia . . . maybe it was just her imagination, which was more than capable of playing a few tricks on her.

This was the ritual. Try and be convincing. Always the same, always very reasonable, always a dismal failure. She turned and looked into the ocean.

The corpse finder still shone brightly under the moon, but now it had stopped drifting. The waves didn't seem to touch it at all; it simply rose above them like a high jumper in slow motion and waited for them to pass under, as if it were irrevocably anchored to the spot.

Which was roughly a hundred yards from shore.

She ground her teeth. Terrific, David. It worked. You're out getting stewed to the gills and I'm standing vigil over a drowned body.

Her heart tried squirting again, but still she looked. The waters were churning, gearing up for the explosion of foam and power that would soon come pounding, it seemed, right to the back door, beckoning. White froth like a rabid animal, shattering sheels, shedding the seaweed that would wrap itself around the sand-killed trees, a subterranean serpent and she its water-logged Eve. There was something hideous about the night tides, something dark and unthinkable, yet she, at times, could well understand why lemmings marched unblinking into the oceans and seas; the sheer *force* of the tide was enough to overwhelm any living creature. They had been the first to emerge from the waters of the earth and touch land, the tides, and they kept going back only to return six hours later, as if some huge beast lay sleeping under the ocean floor, inhaling for six hours then, after it tired, releasing its breath; a reminder to the two-legged creatures on land that things bigger than themselves controlled the real forces of existence and always would.

Clumps of algae clung to rocks nearby, stunned swimmers hanging on for dear life in hope of a speedy rescue and return home. The sand was white and duned, cluttered by skeins of kelp, hunks of driftwood, skeletal remnants of surfboards and skis, drenched and molding reminders of those fallen to the waves and tides.

She felt something prickling at her side.

The tides.



More than their sight, their froth, their power, it was their *sound* that most frightened her. The lapping and churning and crashing all merged somewhere far above the sand to take on the sound of mighty, obdurate wings, the moon-pull simply an exponential doorway into this world, the rhythm of the waters a pulsing, sententious flow of eternity, calling, singing, approaching closer every night. The tides gave life to her own personal deathbird, constantly circling over the cabin, looking for food to carry back to its nest, feeding its young until they, too, could fly in the night and search out their own Debra . . . throbbing, brewing, rising, calling, coming closer, closer, teasing, then pulling back, promising to come closer the next time. Tides. The first conundrum. Lonely siren singing. Embrace me. Let me caress you, cleanse you, awaken in you sensations never before felt. Come closer, that's it, a little more, dance with me, cascading, dance over here, touch, experience, there—

*I have you now.*

Debra snapped her head to the side and closed her eyes. This was definitely overreacting. It was just water, with no consciousness, no reason, nothing along those lines. So *what* if David's little device had worked? There were probably thousands of drowned bodies in the water; after all, wasn't something like seventy-three percent of the world's surface covered by it? Good reason . . . good as any. She looked toward the silver corpse finder.

Was it closer?

No, huh-uh. It was still anchored to its find, and to the best of her knowledge there hadn't been a drowned body washed up here in some time, so why worry, right?

Right.

So why was she worried?

She checked her watch; a little more than twenty minutes until tide. Enough time to gather some driftwood and get a fire started. She walked across the room and tripped on the corner of an up-turned rug, stumbled into the bookshelf and knocked one of its volumes to the floor. It landed on its spine and fell open to a random page, something no human being can resist looking at. Debra picked up the book and saw it was her copy of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. Her eyes scanned to the top of the page and saw 288, and just below that, one word:

## AMYMONÉ

She read on:

She was one of the Danaids. Her father sent her to draw water and a satyr saw her and pursued her. Poseidon heard her cry for help, loved her and saved her from the satyr. With his trident he made in her honor the spring which bears her name.

She thought that was very sweet, until she flipped back to read who and what the Danaids were. She then, *very* quickly, closed the book and crammed it back onto its place on the shelf, her thoughts wandering back to David and why he chose to leave her here, knowing that she was half comatose with fright, be it real or imagined. Why did love always have to carry with it the threat of emotional violence? Why, when you cared about someone enough to want to be an irreplaceable part of their life, why were there times when you really wanted to kill them? The Danaids—fifty sisters who married their fifty cousins and then murdered their husbands in the wedding bed—had acted on this impulse, and for their act they marched forever in hell, eternally filling jars with water from a spring, jars that were riddled with holes so the water leaked out, causing them to again and again return to refill their pathetic containers. The brides of Sisyphus. Debra shook her head. You didn't want to kill them just with words, the one you loved, but literally wrap your hands around their throat and squeeze until the last ounce of life dripped from their flesh, leaving a crumpled and cold mass of rubbery skin drooped over useless bones. Maybe the Danaids had something after all.

Maybe she was rapidly starting to walk in Amymoné's footsteps.

With that cheerful thought she donned her plastic parka and went outside to gather driftwood for the fire. She had about fifteen minutes if she hurried.

She descended the dunes, lost her footing, and tumbled down to the beach in a tangle of sand clouds and curses. The beach was, of course, deserted, one of the reasons they'd chosen to come here during the off season. During the day only a few dozen people roamed the sands, and at night there was virtually no one around.

No one.

Everything was stitched in crescent-shaped shadows under the

moon, shadows that hinted at the things which lay outside the reach of the murky yet ethereal glow from the sky. In the distance, somewhere between the waters and the tidemarks in the sand, a buoy clanged out its metallic canticle to a world that couldn't hear it for musical, a world that muffled its echo like a scream down a tunnel. The deserted lifeguard tower, monolithic and forbidding, stood pointing toward the moon like a giant skeletal finger. A foghorn sounded somewhere far, far away. A lighthouse that stood off in the night, its exterior decayed and crumbling, offered no reply to the pitiful outcalling. If there had ever been any doubt in Debra's mind that she was alone, it was now erased.

She jaunted around the beach, quickly snatching up the pieces of kelp and driftwood that offered themselves up to her, and within minutes her arms were full enough to return to the cabin.

A sharp stab of light pierced her eyes and she dropped the firewood at her feet. She tried shielding her eyes from the intense light, but even closed the brightness penetrated them. She finally turned away, but in the instant before her back was to it, she saw that the light emanated from the flood lamp on top of the lifeguard tower. She took a series of deep, angry breaths.

"Very funny, David! Now you can just get your ass down here and help me pick all this up!"

There was no answer but that of the blowing wind.

"All right, that's enough! Get down here . . . please? I'm sorry that I was so unpleasant earlier."

No answer. She turned and began picking up her wood, and then she saw.

Her pair of discarded starfish had been joined by others now, only they weren't scattered randomly about as they should have been. They were lying in a perfect line that extended all the way across the beach and climbed the dune, nearly reaching the back door of the cabin. She remained unmoving.

"God damn it, *please* come down," she whispered.

The light snapped off.

There was no sound from the blackness of the tower and, somehow, she knew with the absolute certainty that the darkness and its fear always provide that it wasn't David in the tower.

She heard the sound of massive wings, fluttering, soaring, then flapping ever closer. The tide spray was already spattering in her face, its icy wetness only adding to her fear. She scaled

the dunes, trying desperately to ignore the line of starfish, darted back into the cabin, then closed the glass doors and locked them tight. She dumped the wood down in front of the glowing fire and proceeded to lock every door and window in the house. If there was some creep running around out there trying to get his jollies by scaring the holy bejeezus out of her, she'd just wait it out in here. She never gave in to panic without a fight, and she refused to do so now any more than she already had. She poured herself a glass of wine, popped a cassette into the player, and sat in front of the crackling fire as the soothing chords of Vivaldi's "Le Quattrro Stagione" filtered majestically into the air.

It wasn't until the end of the first movement that she realized there was a fire burning in front of her, a fire that hadn't been burning when she left, and when she *did* realize this she leapt to her feet, spilled the wine, and grabbed the poker. Through the rear window she saw that the tide was bouncing off the dunes in a springlike fashion, which meant that its power would increase more and more until she could literally feel the force under her feet, even though the cabin was almost a hundred feet above the beach.

She turned up the music to a point that neared distortion, checked every door and window again to assure herself she'd locked them all, then inspected every room to make sure she was alone. The idea that this creep, whoever he was, had been in here made her feel sick inside.

Damn you.

I know you're out there and I know you're watching me, but just try it, fucker. Just try anything and I'll pound your brains right out of your ears. Just try it. You and your goddamn trick with the starfish. That was pretty good, though, I'll give you that. You must have been watching me for quite some time now.

Damn you. Look what you're doing to me.

She found herself recalling the time David had let himself into her apartment with the spare key and left a nice little note for her on the kitchen table. She trusted David, more so than she had any other man, and she knew that he'd probably never go snooping about her place, but it was that *probably* that stayed with her; privacy was damned important to her, an after-effect of a childhood that held not one moment of blissful isolation or secrecy. That afternoon when she found his note, Debbie realized just how violated a person could feel about something like that;

as if some alien thing had oozed into her life while she wasn't looking, touched everything she had to touch, then skulked out before she could do anything about it, leaving behind its scent, its traces, its calling card that read: *You will never be alone again after this, I am always watching and I am always here.*

That feeling was with her now. Violation. Some jerk-wad beach dweller had dragged himself in here and left a fiery calling card right in front of her, a calling card that was intended, obviously, to unnerve, and had achieved its desired effect. Like the floodlight. But that was all right because she was in here and that fucker, whoever he/she/it might be, was out there with the foam, the tide, the flapping deathbird in all its power and hunger. She turned to walk back over and sit in front of the fire, but her eyes wouldn't let her relax. She saw small black spots out of the corner of her eyes, spots that would loom over objects on the other side of the room and then snap back to hide behind things when she turned to face them. The music seemed to be too sharp then, too flat in her ears, shaking loose parts of her spinal column. She took a few sips of wine but it tasted like swallowed smoke. Outside the deathbird foamed and flapped, its talons reaching forth to scrape across the roof with every bouncing of the foam. The violins were screeching now, and she reached over to turn the music down, but the screeching continued. Low, almost guttural howls raced around the windows, slashes of water flung themselves into the glass, and shadows split under the moonlight to spread themselves across the darkening sand.

*Calm down*, she thought. Take it the hell easy or you'll go nuts. It's no big thing, right? If mother were here breathing down your neck she'd tell you what a hopeless child you were, frightened of a little wind and water, and she'd be right. Stop injecting such malevolent undertones into everything, that's how paranoia starts and that's the last thing you need right now.

She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths, then poured herself another glass of wine.

The screeching continued from outside, and in some equidistant part of herself Debra knew that it wasn't *just* the wind. She shook her hair out of her face and began to take her place back in front of the fireplace when another dark spot made its presence known to the corner of her eye, but, unlike the others, this one did not run and hide when she turned to face it; it simply hovered for a few moments and then threw itself into the window as the

screeching reached its crescendo.

Debra rose and crossed to the window, counting the steps as she did so. Nine. Nine steps from the window to the fireplace, the distance across her island. And it would be; for the next five hours, or however long it took for David to return, this would be her island, these nine steps, nothing more. Maybe it was boxing herself in, but the cabin seemed to be shrinking anyway, so it was best to be prepared.

She stared out the window and was surprised to find that it wasn't all that difficult to see out into the ocean.

But five seconds later she wished that it had been.

The screeching wasn't *just* the wind. And there were reasons. The wind couldn't anchor itself to one spot. The wind couldn't maintain the same pitch constantly . . .

And the wind couldn't wave its arms for help.

Debra unlocked the doors and flung them open. She hoped that maybe, just *maybe*, she'd imagined the figure in the water screaming and thrashing. What if her late-night boogeyman decided to take a dip and had gone out too far? But it wasn't a boogeyman, because the screaming was definitively female to Debra's ears. She tried focusing her eyes again but could discern nothing in the ocean, and whatever it was hadn't been that far away. She darted to the kitchen table and pulled her parka off the seat of a chair, then dropped it when she saw what had been hidden beneath.

David's corpse finder, thermometer still intact.

The screaming started again. The foam bounced back, leaving her deathbird a marked target.

She stared at the loaf for several moments before her shock was replaced by anger. Damn it! She'd *let* it frighten her! Whoever put it here knew it would make her jump out of her pants . . .

So why didn't you see it when you threw your parka down there? It's a big goddamned loaf of zwieback wrapped in aluminum foil with a thermometer sticking out of it! A little hard to miss, so *why didn't you see it?*

Answer, dummy: *Because it wasn't there.*

Something large and heavy careened off the glass doors from outside, spiderwebbing a large crack in its wake and causing Debra to shriek and jump back. Acting on impulses born of anger and fear she snatched up the corpse finder and ran over to the window, arching back to heave it out to where it belonged. In the

instant before she saw what thrashed in the water screaming, she realized, for some obscure, incomprehensible reason, that her watch had stopped.

She dropped the zwieback loaf and stood watching herself drown.

She heard the creature with her face scream for David who wasn't there because he had better things to do than sit around with her on her nine-step island where corpses delivered their own tombstones and starfish marched from the sea and birds flung themselves through spiderweb cracks that looked more and more like eyes with the passing of each stilled moment. She tried to stop her hands from shaking but couldn't. She folded them, rubbed them together, made them into fists and pounded them against the sides of her legs, but their dissociated trembling continued, as did the shouting and struggling of the creature that wore her face in the water. She turned away for only a moment and saw the reflection of a pair of headlights in the window, then sprinted over just in time to see David running for the dunes. She ran back over to the glass doors and saw him as he jumped into the roaring waters, screaming her name, pumping his legs in a furious effort to get to her, only it wasn't her he was swimming toward. She threw open the doors and jumped back as the tide threw seemingly dozens of starfish in at her feet, but she quickly jumped over them and lunged out toward the dunes, toward the tides, the sound of wings beating louder and louder in her ears, the cries of the deathbird pulsing through her chest in glorious expectation. She skidded to a halt just below the base of the dunes and opened her mouth to scream, but sharp talons dug into her side, deep into her flesh, and tore away part of her, lifted it, mangled and tormented, it, then carried it out over David and dropped it in the spot where the creature with her face and body came into full being, having been given that part of itself Debra had long denied to herself and those she cared for. On the beach Debra collapsed into the sand and tried to shout a warning to David, but then, even though she was on land, she could see only through the eyes of the creature in the water, and what she saw with these eyes was the vision of a well-lighted cabin on the beach while merciless and angry waters latched onto her limbs and tried to drag her under, laughing. But just ahead, just in the distance, she saw something which gave her hope, because there was a figure, a familiar figure, coming toward her through the slashing droplets,

a determined figure that was calling to her not to be afraid, a figure that promised her warmth and dry land and other things she could not imagine. The waters pulled down on her and again she tasted bitter, stinging salt, but then she was up and there was air, her lungs spewing out the vile coldness that was trying to weigh them down for eternity . . . fight it . . . and still the figure of David kept pushing its way toward her, still calling, still promising safety and peace. She pushed upward with her legs and waved her arms away from her chest, pushing back the waves that were trying to snuff out her life like rain would a candle flame. Things below brushed by her legs, causing them to buckle and jerk her down, but she saw the lights from the warm shelter on the beach and found still new reserves of strength. Overhead there were nightclouds that tried to force themselves over the moon to ease the pull of the tides for her, but these clouds were too slow and the foam too powerful. She tried to call out again but the talons were still in her side, drawing out her life's blood with every bouncing back of the waters, of the blue, the foam, the pulsebeat of infinity. The figure suddenly reached her and she felt as its strong and loving arms enfolded her, but then some sleeping creature below said *No, it's not the way I want it* and lurched up to sink its teeth into her legs, and the pain was great, angry fire within her strained and agonized muscles, and in desperation she grabbed the saving figure by the hair, then the ears, then the eyes, anywhere she could secure some kind of grip to stay above surface. She clawed, suddenly, then scratched and screamed and struggled against the beast below, but the figure, her David, didn't know that she was fighting something other than itself because it tried to slap her, tried to shock her into lifeless submission. She arched her back and prayed for the power of the great wings, a power that would enable her to shoot upward and fly above it all to land on the soft beach like the gulls in summertime did, but the pull was too great, too monstrous for her to comprehend, so she slammed down into the saving figure of her David and began clawing at the torn and bleeding flesh on its face, finally reaching for its eyes as a fist whalloped into her mouth, causing no pain, leaving no impression. Nothing but the water left impressions now. She sank her fingers into one of the eyes and pulled it out as new cries filled the air. Black liquid ran through her clenched fingers and into the savior's gaping mouth as the hungry beast reached up to pull them both down into the



murky blue beyond the swirling foam. She looked down to see a sloping canyon that opened itself full before her, filled with dark green leaves, black sea urchins, and small flowerlike white algae where fingerlings browsed. She reached out to touch them, her chest full of peace, just as a school of silvery stars, the goat bream, round and flat as saucers, swam by in rocky chaos. Bubbles escaped from her mouth and swelled on their way up through the pressure layers, flattening out like mushrooms when they pressed against the medium. The surface of the ocean shone down to her like the reflection of a defective mirror, and soon the arms of the savior, her David, soon its arms slumped to its side, a small school of fish burrowing their way into its skull through the open eye socket. She closed her eyes and heard no sounds, save for that of a mild stream that flowed gently through her brain, a stream where so many maidens dipped into its waters with decaying and leaking jars, jars that returned the waters to this stream, so serene and cool and rewarding, like the wind from the wings that flapped over the shore of dreams and demons ...

A trident was offered up to her ...

The maidens looked to her and smiled ...

She felt David's loving arms pull away ...

... bubbles broke against the surface.

Sometime later Debra sat up on the beach and opened her eyes, watching as the heavy clouds began breaking up and allowing some sunlight to ripple through. She turned and watched the headlights of David's car fizzle out. Beside her there lay one starfish, and next to it a shoe she recognized as being David's. The tide was running far, far away, and Debra smiled. Yes, my Amymone. Love is born of fear, and this fear is manifested in our loneliness. Maybe now David knew how she'd felt all this time, and maybe, maybe *soon*, as soon as the sleeping monster below began to release its breath, maybe then she'd know how David had felt during those last few moments, and then the two of them would be together at last, united forever there within the waves ...

Which was all she'd ever wanted; probably since the moment of her birth.

She smiled, crossed her legs, and turned to face the figure kneeling next to her. So beautiful was this stranger, who was not a stranger at all.

"I'm waiting for David," said Debra. "He'll be coming back soon."

"They all come back," said the figure. Debra smiled at her new-found sister, stood erect, and picked up her jar.

There was much to be done, here by the waters.

# Locking Up

by JOHN MACLAY

Some habits  
are just too comfortable to break.

I wouldn't call myself a meticulous man. I go two months between haircuts, would rather wear old clothes than new, and often eat my meals in front of the tv. But I am an orderly man—even my wife says so. My home office may be cluttered with stacks of papers and printouts, yet I know exactly where everything is.

And despite my relaxed days, my intense worknights as a freelance systems analyst, I do have certain routines—or I should say, still have; because many of them are left over from my dozen mistaken years in a nine-to-five job and as a family man-householder only. I go to the Post Office every day, downtown to the bank once a week, have lunch with an old acquaintance every two, attend a lodge meeting each month, subscribe to the opera. I cut the grass and paint the house in the summer, shovel snow and add antifreeze in the winter. And after all, there's that haircut. So I'm not to be mistaken for that rebel-from-birth, that man or woman who can't fix a car, drive a nail, or even send off the right letter in the right envelope.

I value my relative freedom—but I also need my routines. Because, as I once told my teenage son, if you bend over backward to do certain outward things, particularly the unpleasant ones—to take care of them—you'll be even more able to forget them when you go inside yourself, to that place where you really live. As Balzac said: "Be orderly in your life"—or something like that—"so that you may be violent in your work." And that applies especially well if you live in the city, as I do, where a lack of attention to certain routines can bring real violence into both parts of your existence. Certain routines . . . like locking up.

Every night for the past six years, ever since we moved here, I've done the same four things. After my family has gone to

bed—and I've counted the numbers off mentally, sometimes even verbally—I've (1.) walked out front, checked the street, then come back and triple-locked the front door, (2.) checked that all the windows downstairs, and the cellar door, are closed and locked, (3.) walked out back, checked the garage, then double-locked the back door, and (4.) turned on the Rollins alarm. Only then have I gone upstairs relaxed, ready to work in the midnight quiet, secure in the knowledge that even the outside sounds that do penetrate my far-off mind can mean no harm to me. Every night ... until last night, when I became aware of a small problem.

It was when I was on the "garage" check, walking through the cool air, taking a moment to look up at the moon. Suddenly, there were the voices—whispering, from beyond the hedge.

"... there he is."

I thought of stopping, retreating to the house—but the routine, I suppose, was just too strong. So I kept walking, tried the garage door, then turned to go back.

"... same thing every night." I heard a chuckle. "So ... easy. We just wait, grab him, take him inside, kill him—then the silver, the woman ... all of it's ours."

I guess the voices did bother me—but I had things to do, a computer program to finish for the morning mail. And the police, if I called them, would never come in time. So I just (3a.) locked the back door, (4.) switched the alarm on ... and went upstairs to my office.

The program was a good one—one of my best, which, consistent with the masochist's triumph of my chosen profession, kept me up until dawn, at which time I rolled into bed beside my sleeping, unconsciously grumbling wife. And when I awoke, at eleven in the morning, I felt refreshed. Even the voices, which I dimly remembered as I brushed my teeth, were only details—to be taken care of, in the course of my free-form, resting day, along with more pleasant things: a planned trip downtown, a lunch with an old friend.

So tonight, when I set out once more upon my numbered lock-up routine, there was no problem at all. I went through numbers (1.) and (2.), then sauntered out to the garage.

The men, the two of them, were even worse than they'd sounded—the absolute dregs of society, like nothing I'd seen even when, by way of diversion, I'd gone "slumming." Cut-off t-shirts, impossibly developed muscles, twisted faces—advancing surreally,

pushing through the hedge. And they were laughing.

"'Same thing every night,'" the taller of them said, leering, extending a huge, filthy hand—

I smiled, turned from the garage door, casually looked up at the moon. Reached into my old jacket.

"Same thing every night," I said quietly—and they laughed again, sure of their horrible conquest over the slow-witted man who stood before them, who could only echo their words. Yet just as surely, my hand closed over the cold metal. "But not the same thing"—I continued—"every day!"

"So easy!" I couldn't resist adding, to their unbelieving faces, as I used the Smith and Wesson—*pop, pop*—I'd bought after lunch, then walked calmly into the house to complete numbers (3.) and (4.) of my routine. And as I climbed to my office, I also couldn't help paraphrasing Balzac: "Sometimes, to keep the order, to tend to the unpleasant details, you have to be a little bit violent in your life, too." Then, as I sat at my desk, I noted down—as every thinking person should, Chinese proverblike—what the experience had taught me: "The proof of a good routine is the knowledge of when to break it."

I developed another good program tonight. And now, as I go to bed, I'm leaving a note on my wife's bedside table, asking her to call the police in the morning, explain what happened, and have them remove the bodies in the yard. She, and they, can take care of it—I'll sleep in, and answer questions later. Because, you see, I'm an orderly man—not a meticulous one.

# The Epiphenomena of Morphogenesis

by DAVID C. KOPASKA-MERKEL

He couldn't really have seen  
a foot-and-a-half tall gingerbread man  
running south on Maple Street.

"Run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm a gingerbread man!" So sang the gingerbread man gaily as he dodged around Ron's feet and ran around the corner onto 19th Street. Ron rubbed his eyes violently and looked cautiously about—everyone was sleepily trudging to work, and no one seemed to have noticed a foot-and-a-half tall gingerbread man run south on Maple and turn east onto 19th.

Ron walked to the corner and looked down 17th. There was no sign of the gingerbread man. "I must be still asleep," he said to himself, shaking his head. Ron hurried down to the bus stop, arriving there just as the bus wheezed to a halt. He clambered on, a little nervous as a result of the encounter with the gingerbread man, and fumbled in his pocket for the fare. He dropped two quarters on the floor of the bus.

"Excuse me!" A fat black woman wielding an enormous purse shoved by him, glaring, and sat down in the front seat. One of the quarters appeared to have crawled into the minute crack between the front wall of the bus and the floor. He retrieved the other and dug the rest of his change out of his pocket. Behind him he heard people coughing and someone saying, "What's the holdup up there?!"

"Sorry," he told the bus driver, "just pennies left."

"At's all right Mr. Clark, just siddown." He slid into an empty seat and stared out the window.

At the next stop a huge black man wearing a tank top and smoking an unusually noxious cigar sat down next to him. Ron edged over to the window a little more and tried not to cough. He thought about nursery rhymes, and gingerbread men fifty feet tall, racing through fields of trampled wheat. He decided to count how many times the word "love" appeared on billboards between here and the office. He'd gotten to four when he caught a glimpse of the top part of a billboard behind a passing semi. RUN, RUN, AS YOU FAST AS YOU CAN, it exhorted. Ron jerked on the cord and squeezed out past the tank top at the next corner. Trembling, he ran back half a block until he could see the rest of the sign. The second line read: DOWN, TO SECOND NATIONAL SAVINGS, WHERE YOUR MONEY EARNS MORE. In the middle of the billboard a gleeful gingerbread man carrying a hefty armload of large bills ran toward a stylized drawing of a bank. Below him were the words THEY CANT CATCH ME, I'M A SECOND NATIONAL MAN!

Ron didn't have enough change left to catch the next bus, so he walked the twelve blocks to the Post building. Anita glanced up at him without interrupting her typing when he sidled in at 8:32. "Stebbins wants to see you half an hour ago, Ron." Before Ron could answer, the editor bellowed from his office on the other side of the reception room.

"If that's you, Clark, it's about time! Get your ass in here!" Ron considered but immediately rejected the idea of telling the truth. No excuse at all would be far better.

"Well?!"

"What was it you wanted to see me about, sir?"

Stebbins waved his arm at the piles of paper littering his desk and spilling over onto the floor. "Does this suggest anything to you?"

"That you've got work to do?"

"That's right! And so do you. You've got two features that have to be turned in in final form by ten o'clock this morning, and two more by five tonight. Get to it!"

Ron nodded assent and hurried to his desk.

He finished the second feature at three minutes after ten and took them both in to Stebbins. As he walked into the editor's of-

fice, he caught the tail end of a news broadcast on Stebbins' radio: "... have been sighted all over town. Police have as yet been unsuccessful in their attempts to catch one of the *click*." Stebbins turned off the radio and pointed wordlessly at the clock, which showed 10:05. Ron smiled sickly and turned the radio back on. "... is no cause for alarm. The *click*." Stebbins turned the radio off again and gave Ron a long slow measuring look. Then he held out his hand for the two features. Ron dropped them on the desk and glanced sidelong at the radio.

"Sir?"

"Ye-es ..." Stebbins said encouragingly.

"Um. Did you happen to hear what that news report was about?"

"No-o." Still smiling, he added, "Two more by five," and picked up his red pen. "Yes, sir." Ron backed out of the office and was about to return to his desk when he saw several of the other writers clustered around Anita's desk. He turned and strolled over to them, trying to appear nonchalant.

Anita raised an eyebrow. "You, too? What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing," he said casually. "Anybody catch a news broadcast today?"

"Now you know we never watch tv or listen to the radio!" John Phelps, the sportswriter, admonished.

"Or read the paper," added one of the typesetters who was walking by.

"Well, did anyone see anything ... odd this morning?" Ron persisted. No one had. When Stebbins appeared in the doorway to his office Ron reluctantly went back to his desk, but he couldn't concentrate on what he was writing. A few minutes before eleven he stopped by Anita's desk again. She was on the phone, taking notes on a memo slip.

"I'm off to do a little research for one of my articles," he called and slipped out the door before Stebbins could catch him. Stebbins stood just outside in the hall, smiling pleasantly and holding a steaming cup of coffee. He nodded to Ron and gestured expansively.

"Sure, you can go to the restroom, don't even have to ask. When you're done with that, check on these rumors about gingerbread men; I'll have Phelps finish your articles." He strolled into the office complex and closed the door firmly behind him, leaving Ron staring with open mouth at a crude chalk drawing of a run-



ning gingerbread man on the outside of the door about a foot off the ground. He stooped to rub it off, changed his mind, and headed for the street.

Figuring that the police station would be a good place to start, Ron began walking the eight blocks to the City Hall/Justice Building. He still hadn't gotten any change. Passing by the art museum, he glanced at it just in time to see a small gingerbread man run up the worn marble steps and disappear inside. Ron took the wide steps two at a time, but when he reached the lobby the gingerbread man was nowhere in sight. He paid the fifty cent fee with a five (now he could ride the bus home) and leaned against the counter. "Get any gingerbread men coming in today?" he asked. The ticket taker stared at him blankly. "No? Well, keep your eyes open."

He decided to check around in the museum to see if he could find the gingerbread man. He wandered through the Renaissance room: no gingerbread man; the Greco-Roman room: no gingerbread man; the surrealism room: no gingerbread man. Nobody at all, in fact; surrealism must not be very popular.

"You can't catch me!" piped a high, thin voice at the level of his knee. Ron stiffened, then forced himself to relax.

"I wouldn't want to."

"You wouldn't?!" The voice sounded surprised, and maybe a little put out. Ron risked a glance downward out of the corner of his eye. The gingerbread man stood at ease a few inches from Ron's right leg. He looked tempting: moist brown gingerbread, semi-sweet chocolate chips for eyes and nose, a strip of lemon frosting for the mouth, and a row of silver candy beads for buttons. Ron stepped back slowly and leaned against the wall.

"Why are all you little gingerbread guys running around the city?" he asked casually. The gingerbread man looked surprised, his lemon frosting mouth forming a perfect "O."

"You mean you ... Oh, you're putting me on!" it accused.

"No, really, I don't know. Tell me."

The gingerbread man settled back comfortably against the base of a bizarre copper structure entitled *Room with Anteater*. "Well ..."

"There he is! Get him!"

"You there, don't let him get away!"

Two policemen, a museum staff member, and a little old lady who was apparently only interested in viewing the exhibits

clustered in the doorway. The gingerbread man leaped up and dashed across the room toward the fire exit. One of the policemen fired twice, demolishing *Ascension of the Reichstag* but not materially affecting *Holes 4A*. He raced across the room and yanked open the fire exit door, but the gingerbread man was gone. The museum staffer stood wringing his hands in the center of the room.

The other policeman confronted Ron sternly. "Why didn't you catch him?!"

The old lady gave him a withering look: "Don't you know you can't catch a gingerbread man?" she said scornfully and strode out of the room. Ron followed her into the hall, hesitated a moment, and then walked out of the museum and began strolling about the downtown area, looking for another gingerbread man.

"Just when you want one," he muttered after nearly an hour, "there isn't a one in sight." Passing through Agnew Park he heard the sound of childish singing. After a few minutes of searching he came upon about a dozen gingerbread men dancing in a circle in the grass and singing:

"Run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm a gingerbread man!" Twenty or so children sat or stood about them absorbedly watching the performance. Reluctant to intrude, Ron turned to go look elsewhere. From behind him he heard a high voice call:

"You better run as fast as you can, Mr. Clark!" He didn't know whether it was one of the children or one of the gingerbread men, but he hurried a little faster and did not look back.

On the south side of the park he turned down an alley that led to the Mall. In the middle of the alley he suddenly came upon a mongrel dog worrying at something lying on the ground. Prompted by he didn't know what instinct, Ron chased the dog off and turned the half-eaten object over with his foot. It was the upper part of the torso and head of a gingerbread man; the rest was already eaten.

"You can't catch me," Ron said softly, and then shuddered. A starling perched on an overturned trash can.

"You said it," the starling remarked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"This is the beginning of the end," the starling explained. "Gingerbread men coming alive is one of the first signs, not to mention starlings being able to speak human-talk. They are



epiphenomena, by-products, if you will, of a cosmic morphogenesis which stretches the fabric of our protoreality to the breaking point. The universe remains in a metastable state, however, as long as certain basic laws are still valid."

"You mean . . ." Ron gasped.

"Yep," the starling replied, "if you can catch a gingerbread man, *anything* can happen." The bird flew off into the swirling orange and pink sky, and Ron felt himself soaking into the pungent spongy cobblestones.

"I ran as fast as I could," whispered the maimed gingerbread man, a tear in his chocolate eye.

"Yep," the starling replied, "if you can catch a gingerbread man, *anything* can happen." The bird flew off into the swirling orange and pink sky, and Ron felt himself soaking into the pungent spongy cobblestones.

"I ran as fast as I could," whispered the maimed gingerbread man, a tear in his chocolate eye.

# Hellter-Shelter!

by J. N. WILLIAMSON

O'Malley waited breathlessly for the end of the world. But when it finally came it was something of a disappointment.

When he'd finished building his bomb shelter, O'Malley took the special information that had come to him from a high government source into his hole in the ground and left the rest of his life outside—

Including Mildred, Timmie, and little Clarissa.

Later, when they began to pound on the reinforced steel door, along with their neighbors the Townsends and his boss, Mr. Rankin, who had come to see why O'Malley wasn't at work that day and had been caught outside just the way he deserved it, O'Malley'd felt pangs of doubt and a rising certainty that he wasn't a very nice man.

Not that he'd thought for a moment about opening the shelter and letting them in. The kids, maybe, if they'd been mute; even Jack Townsend, but never old man Rankin. And never his wife, Mildred. They were the two reasons O'Malley'd hoped the nation would be nuked, and the fact that Timmie and little Clarissa and ol' Jack Townsend had to perish with the rest was *their* fault, not O'Malley's. He paused for a moment after that rather ticklish, depressing instant when they'd all been pleading with him to admit them, dimly aware that he'd skipped someone in toting up those he might almost have allowed to live, and those he wouldn't. Couldn't. Then he realized it was Jack Townsend's wife, and shrugged; what's-her-face was a crony of Mildred's and a cipher who, according to his own neighbor friend Jack, had been as cold a fish as his own wife.

Well, they were going to *fry* shortly and that would warm the two of 'em up!

Initially, when he had begun to build and then outfit his shelter, Mildred had been the same put-down artist she'd always been, but Jack had lent a bit of neighborly support. While he hadn't laughed outright the way some of the other ninnies in the block had done, including Mrs. What's-her-face Townsend and, ultimately, even Timmie and little Clarissa, Jack stopped helping plan the shelter nearly at once. "Right under your wife's thumb to the last," O'Malley had told Jack bitterly, not a month before the terrible, covert news reached O'Malley. Served him right, then, served 'em *all* right!

As for Mr. Rankin, the boss was meant to die up there, acting out a significant category of O'Malleyian vengeance. Rankin was one of only a few people O'Malley *wanted* to perish, preferably as hideously as possible. In the case of the others, of all the rest he knew intimately or had only met, O'Malley just didn't give a damn.

"Darling—it's *me*," Mildred calling, her voice so muffled and all-but-unintelligible that new winds building up began tearing it apart. "We're *here*—family, and—us in!"

He closed his eyes and squeezed them shut until the tears came. *No!* he thought, trying not to scream his words up at them. *Just go away.*

"It's *happening*, the—bombs!" Mildred tried again. Now the wind seemed to acquire another, more-distant wail—something as far off but menacing as the warning cry of a great beast, posed for attack from the peak of a visible mountain. "—on their *way*, darling!—must *help* us!"

O'Malley mumbled "Shit." He sank down to a rung of the metal ladder which led up, or down, depending upon a climber's compassion and intent. *Go away, damn it*, he shrieked inside, abruptly clamping his fingertips over his grimacing lips. Speaking aloud made them *real*, renewed their importance. *This is my chance at freedom from all of you!*

Near silence. O'Malley couldn't detect whether he was imagining it or the people outside the shelter door, on the surface of the planet earth, were ardently conferring. Perhaps they'd try to break in. But that wouldn't help them, if they ruined the sealed hatch—not that that would stop them, if they'd reached a collective, hysterical decision. Which would be just *like* them, like people

anywhere—self-serving, vindictive as sin, emotional, willing to take any chance—they weren't entitled to save their sorry skins.

Jittery now, gulping back stomach-scorching emulsions of belatedly-rising conscience, he looked carefully about him for another mental check of his smartest acquisition of his entire life—a shelter to establish, once and for all, that he was smarter than any people, better than the whole sordid, silly lot of them, those petty fools who'd always striven to put him *down*!

Well, he'd *let* them do it, at the last—permitted the short-sighted imbeciles to put him *all* the way down into the hole in the ground where he would be one of the fortunate few to—

He pinched each of his crossed arms to regain control of himself. Blinking, O'Malley studied (this time) what he was staring at: an Army surplus cot, neatly-folded clothing and bedding, towels and washclothes; lamps that were battery-operated, a carton of extras carefully resting in a corner; shelves he'd built in with Jack's assistance, lined with dried and canned food of numerous varieties, powdered milk, boiled unfluoridated water from a spring west of town, paper plates and picnic utensils; a folding chair and some reading material, playing cards, a book called *76 Solitaire Games to Play on a Desert Island*, and battery-operated Japanese-made radio and tv sets. There was even a loaded rifle, for those who might try to raid his supplies. He saw again his filtration system, one of his more expensive purchases, a chemical toilet, and a long-range Geiger counter rumored to measure radiation on the land surface. He'd bought it from a somewhat dubious character, but he had already ruled out obtaining one from the government. O'Malley'd spent his adulthood placing no trust in anybody, especially not politicians.

—Why hadn't the people up there spoken again? O'Malley had heard no ring of screaming ICBMs, no howls indicative of deadly things, plummeting. Could it be that they were already trying to find a way to break in, the way *he* most assuredly would have done?

"Man, you wouldn't—be down there—if I hadn't helped,—bastard!"

Old Jack, it was old *Jack's* voice, the loudest he'd ever heard it. Usually, his neighbor friend's voice was quiet, self-effacing; Jack rarely swore. How had Jack Townsend's face, movements, tones become so hard to consider, even to remember until now? The truth of his comment touched some remote, decent nerve in

O'Malley's self-involved system. He jumped up from the ladder, started straight up it to the tightly-locked hatch, reached out—

"Damn it, O'Malley, I *order* you to open this door! Who do you think you are?" It was Mr. Rankin, the arrogant prick commanding him, giving O'Malley one more pompous, interfering, direct, final *order*. "Damn you, man, *open it—NOW!*"

An exultant, riposting curse formed on O'Malley's lips but died there. Distantly, he'd realized how likely it was that even Rankin wished to remain alive. *Go away*, he thought, urgently, eyelids twitching like spiderwebs in a breeze. A nerve in one cheek was tunneling like a frightened blind mole. He had stopped with an arm outflung, reaching. It didn't move nearer the shelter's hatch. "Go away," he whispered aloud, "all of you. Please? *Please go.*"

"After what—done—you!" Mildred again, sobbing. He sensed her uninventive perpetual last resort before she put it into words. The wind picking up would not stop her from getting in another zinger. "—mother was *right*—you, all along! You'll—to regret this!" The trembling O'Malley thought of how he was living in order to *stop* regretting, again said, "Please," louder; his nerves were singing because it was really he who was pleading. Mildred, realizing it, was amazingly and incredibly angry: "—you have *in* there? Who is she,—son of a—?"

"Raquel Welch and Charo, and Miss April, and Ann-Margret, Jayne Kennedy, Veronica Hamel, and *you*," he shouted as loudly as he was able, "*you*, when you were new, and nice! In my *memories!* Go *AWAY!*" As close to the hatch as he could get, contorted face mashed against it, O'Malley sensed her once-adored face gone livid with terrified ire on the other side and yelled until his voice broke, until the tears had begun: "I WANT PEACE AND QUIET; SILENCE; *SOLITUDE!* I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF PEOPLE! I MAY STAY HERE FOREVER!"

Mind tumultuous, O'Malley half-stepped, half-stumbled down his ladder and, when he'd fallen to one knee on the concrete floor, he heard little Clarissa begin to weep like an ancient child-ghost, already dead decades—and realized that his son, Timmie, had made no plea of any kind. At that moment he longed to reach outside to choose, selectively, to take one or two with him to safety as he'd once planned, the anguished waif's wail of his daughter merged with a thunderous sound of gusting and titanic winds. There was a *leitmotif* of other, more deafening, indescribable noises and the world they'd all known teetered on the slumped, straining



shoulders of Atlas. Pitching forward onto his face and wrapping his arms over his head, O'Malley pressed palms to his tortured ears and waited—

Until (abruptly, shockingly) the most consuming, ominous silence mortal man had heard formed swiftly around the outer hatch of his bomb shelter as if clumps of infinitely deadening dirt had been shoveled upon his own last resting place.

... Vision clearing and other senses recovering O'Malley found himself staring at his little portable lamp. While its base was quaking, vibrating as if what had transpired even possessed the capacity for inflicting terror upon the insensate—the lamp gave off light ... light, that O'Malley saw with his *living* eyes.

"I am alive," he whispered, incredulous. Overjoyed to a degree he hadn't imagined human beings experienced. Gradually, moving carefully in case one lurching motion might rock the wounded carcass of the planet, he worked his legs beneath him and, tottering, got to his feet. Wonderment and fast-forming self-congratulation illumined his narrow face; it had not yet occurred to him that perhaps no one remained to remark upon his prescience. "I *made* it, I *did* it!" he shouted, and began an improvised jig of joy in the center of the concrete floor. His cup was running over with relief, and unholy triumph. "Why, it wouldn't surprise me if I were the only human being left alive on earth—*me, O'Malley!*"

Behind him, startlingly, the chemical toilet self-flushed. It might have been a social comment but then it tipped on edge and fell on its side. Beneath it and, by extension, beneath the surviving man, the floor ... vibrated. For one awful instant O'Malley believed that his dance *had* shattered the sundered earth, at least caused a quake. Frightened, he gaped at the spot where his toilet had rested, and saw a strange *dimpling* process begin to pucker the concrete floor.

"My God," he called. Much too late. He backed toward the ladder that led up. Forgotten was the rifle in the corner. Someone was trying to break in—from below the *shelter*, from the EARTH.

Punctured, the floor cracked jaggedly, like a sky filled with lightning. O'Malley saw the longest, thickest fingers he had ever witnessed slither up from under the flooring like ten pale snakes, lock upon the rent and *pull*. A great commodious hole was ripped, effortlessly—as if the fingers had torn through toilet paper.

And the big head popped into view, the *back* of it—and the back of the silver-hued, marble-hard horns. Then the shoulders

surfaced, wide as worlds, at once sensually sleek and unimaginably muscled.

O'Malley knew at once the identity of his guest.

The face did not turn slowly toward him, but *snapped* around, depthless orbs not in the slightest searching for him but finding O'Malley, instantly. The chilling gaze bolted to O'Malley's terrified face and he saw the slightest flash of surprise, even pique, in the fathomless eyes. Yet the devil said nothing whatever to him, made no threatening gestures. Instead, there was another pause for the labor needed to drag the entire monstrous naked body into sight.

—And from beneath the apparition's long legs and long feet—unseen—filthily furtive, unintelligible mutterings and sly, puzzling sniggers of covert psychotic merriment issued icily and scuttled across the floor to O'Malley like so many imperceptible vermin. The human being had time to pray that he'd never see such things, to detect a reddish, shadowy luminosity rising from the makeshift opening—

Then the enormous fiend was striding from the pit in his general direction and O'Malley could not tear his awestruck gaze from the creature's face and torso. It was a thing of wintry *white*—the white of winding sheets, treacherous ice frozen cunningly at midnight intersections, of newly-placed tombstones and corpses springing elastically upright in unnatural well-being.

He did not move until the devil had lightly vaulted up the ladder to the hatch, unlocked it and thrown it back, creakingly, in all but a single motion, and leaped out of sight to the unguessable earth's surface. Then O'Malley found it was still impossible to move, not because the entity had harmed him at all but because of his own abject and complete paralyzing terror.

The horned thing had *lowered* the hatch behind him! The trembling mortal dared hope, then, dared wonder if he mightn't be spared, regardless of what the white giant might be doing on the blasted lawns of O'Malley's former neighborhood. He told himself the palpable lie that shock had simply overcome him, he had imagined everything—

But the hatch was opening again and the devil came down from it, *smiling*.

Leaving the hatch up. Rising far above O'Malley's head, a few yards away. Looking down and directly at O'Malley, the smile in place, reflecting.

Then the devilish gaze snapped across the shelter to the gaping

hole and O'Malley knew some contact was immediately made, because from the interior of the pit rose a rush of snortling and snuffling sounds, all anticipatory; a discordant chorus of sniggering, hungry giggles and rasping prayers. O'Malley saw his rifle across the floor as a child's popgun, a silly toy, but began edging toward it anyway, trying to return Satan's smile and feeling his heart and stomach clap and spasm. Eagerness fairly streamed out of the faintly red-hued hole in the shelter floor, that and a tension of passionate supplication. He put out his violently shaking arm and hand for the rifle—

"Come," the devil said invitingly to the denizens of the pit.

O'Malley seized his mortal's weapon and it vanished at his touch. Looking down at where it had been, dumbly, he did not hear the approach of the white demon at once. Then he was in the air, high above the concrete floor, messing himself. "No, no, NO," he squealed, striving to scream the words. "Leave me alone! Go AWAY!"

From behind them, out of O'Malley's view, the noises of other creatures rising from the depths redoubled his terror and his efforts to escape. What he heard was a massing of strangled gasps of glee, and keening relief, an unmellifluous melange of vengeful epithets and demonic melodies of gratitude, the collisions of malformed limbs with diseased torsos, and worst of all—the one harmonious strain of the dreadful chorus—a crystal-clear cheer of long-awaited victory.

O'Malley heard the huge bare feet running up the ladder. He felt the heat of all his summers beat upon his shrinking flesh. He saw the new, bright world of his kind and, flinching, shut his eyes to it once more. He lost consciousness.

And awakening, with no conceivable impression of the amount of time that had passed or of whether time was ever to be measured again—knowing then it had never been accurately "told"—O'Malley raised his head. Part of the sky over the place where his and Mildred's house had stood was a grotesque smear of strange sunshine, like aliens bleeding. And part of that was smoke, and clouds that looked broken and bronzed, as if someone meant to keep them as a souvenir. O'Malley saw, everywhere in the distance, the infinite variety of fires; with no one to fight them, they appeared to be working out new color schemes. Buildings continued to cave in and tumble as if they had lost their stomachs or spines without occupants and were giving up that good fight.

But the immediate area encompassing O'Malley's scorched and sizzling lot had, he saw with dim or dulled surprise and the awakening of wondering new horror, been *cleared*. He caught sight of erect beings and preferred just then to believe they were living humans. Some, however, shuffled; others were rooted to the ground now and again like scarecrows; others lurched aimlessly, it appeared, around the hot but rubble-free earth. Yet they eventually labored too, at unguessable chores. Blinking because his eyes ached and burned terribly, O'Malley slowly perceived that they were not fellow survivors of nuclear destruction, that their times of trial had occurred long before, even if they shared with him the fact that they had failed, miserably.

He saw the others, then; the main body from Hell—some quite humanlike if he avoided their burning eyes—completing the task of clearing the lot of corpses and other rubble, while others had begun to put up *folding chairs, tables, athletic equipment*—was that a *volleyball net*?

The huge and horsey pale face descended as if its spine were made of rubber, and O'Malley's head whipped round, glanced up, in shocked alarm. Beneath him, O'Malley's groping fingers discovered, what felt like a *lawn* chair. But he could not look to see. Above the devilish head those silver horns rose on stubby and purple-veined stumps ending in nearly triangularly formed heads and, from the blunted tips, some loathesome, colorless fluid alternately dripped and spurted. The eyes, O'Malley saw, weren't slitted or squinting but so enormous, the balls set so deeply, that they glittered brightly and made the rest of the massive face impossible to see clearly. For one racing moment Satan reminded O'Malley of old Mr. Rankin, of his friend Jack, of the face he had seen in his mirror. A stink rose from It constantly, so miserable and breathtaking that he would have fallen but for the lawn chair. Something like steam was emitted from between the devil's red lips in an imitation of mortal breath—possibly it was something *remembered*, or *envied*—and it drifted skyward until it merged naturally with the poisoned air and bled across the beautiful new sky like the last contrail.

"What's happening?" O'Malley managed. "What are . . . *they* . . . doing?"

It spoke two inches from the man's face in a hideous voice of seduction and mock beauty, androgynous and soulless. "I wanted you to see. You're the one who remains. The honor is

yours."

The naked devil straightened until its enormous horned head eclipsed the surreal skies. There was no navel; there were no genitalia. Indeed, it was smooth there, unblemished; it looked like fine white silk, as if it would be soft to the touch. Perhaps Its devotion to sexuality as a means by which to seize human souls had stemmed from some spite, from a jealousy forever frustrated; but that, the man named O'Malley understood, was all in the past now. Even Satan did not envy the frozen and all-but-forgotten dinosaur.

"What a lovely day." It twitched a short, pointed tail that barely emerged from between the lean, white cheeks. It glanced down at O'Malley, smirking, and pointed to several demon workers struggling to drive a post into what had belonged to the O'Malley family. The triumphant titanic imp sighed its satisfaction. "One gains greater cooperation when one provides suitable incentives. It was not I who learned from men of business but rather the obverse. But until now, my people and I—these workers are a fraction of those who have come to love me—were infrequently allowed the homely comforts of the planet's surface. Now," it looked around, peered into the distance in every direction, "we are *starved* for . . . recreation."

Finished, the workers lined up to face O'Malley. With Satan, they smiled with unblinking, vengeful eyes and twisted, hungry lips. One of their number turned the sign so that O'Malley might read the awful words emblazoned upon it:

DEVILWORLD  
RESORT & VACATION LAND  
TOURS OF UNALTERED "LIVING MUSEUMS" AVAILABLE  
*PICNIC FOOD AND SNACKS PROVIDED*

# DANCING IN THE DARK

by ELAINE RADFORD

Breeding dodo birds wasn't the *only* thing they were doing over in the secret laboratory. Oh no, not at all.

They were making dodos, or so the talk went, manufacturing genetic code in Top Secret Ornithological Laboratories 1, 2, 4, and 6. *Why dodos?* Misha wanted to know, and Papa shrugged: who knows? Why not dodos? Inside he smiled at the boy's innocence, for the true dodos were surely the military birdbrains who'd concocted that tissue-thin cover story.

Waving their arms before them, father and son trudged through the thick mist of mosquitoes that swarmed endlessly from the taiga slush. "Hard to believe we actually prayed for this," Papa said, smiling through his dark beard. "Hard to believe we really asked for spring."

Misha laughed. "We had to, Papa," he replied. "My left boot is split, see?" He kicked up his foot so that his father could inspect the worn leather. Misha might have kicked higher, aiming for the sky, had not the weight of his twelve years reminded him to assume an adult dignity, for despite the pesky insects, the new season sang in his blood like the nightingale.

Papa frowned as he looked down. "That sole could be repaired. Tonight you must be sure to show your mother."

But Misha had danced away into sunlight and melting snow, weather-beaten boots forgotten. Nearing Shed 9, he began to shout, "Ho, Nina, good morning, Sasha, morning, Starlight . . ." By the time he'd scaled the wooden fence and hopped down on the other side, he'd greeted each of his stately charges by name.

The man entered by the gate, the corners of his mouth twitching upward as he watched his son lug out the heavy bags of dog biscuit and millet. Little Queenie (named subversively, after the heroine of an American rock tune) jealously prevented the other Siberian cranes from drawing too close to her precious Misha. She jabbed here and darted there, wielding her long yellow beak like a dagger. Pyotr Mikhailovich smiled as he thought: *That one will never understand she's just a bird like all the rest.*

"Don't be such a pest, Queenie. Let Starlight have a petting if she wants." Misha tried to sound stern as he admonished the meter-and-a-half tall bird, but the special affection rang out clearly in his voice. The raising of Queenie, begun four years ago after the parents had abandoned the nest, had been the boy's first real responsibility in the crane shed. He'd looked after egg, and later chick, with the intensity other eight-year-olds reserved for puppies and ponies. The great white bird repaid his love with a fierce possessiveness, for early imprinting had convinced her that she and the child were members of a single species.

At that moment, Queenie chose to demonstrate that even a heartfelt love could fail to inspire blind obedience. Ignoring Misha's rebuke, she stepped forward on one stiltlike leg to stab at Starlight. The older bird scurried away in a flurry of wing-flapping.

"Oh, Queenie," Misha scolded. "Don't you think there's enough of me to go around?"

Papa strode forward then, uncoiling a length of hose. "Let me take care of that dirty trough—"

Faster than sight Queenie lunged with sharp cruel beak. The man stumbled back as the bird skewered his hand. Bright drops fell onto dirty snow.

"Queenie! Papashka!" the boy cried. He grabbed the crane, lifting her bodily away from his father. All feathers, neck, and legs, the tall bird was light enough for such handling. "Queenie! What nonsense is this?"

The crane stalked away in a huff, shaking out ruffled feathers as she went. Misha turned to Papa, who'd already risen to his feet with a scatological oath.

"Are you all right, Papashka? She didn't really hurt you, did she?"

"Damn the bitch, she's pecked halfway through my hand," the man roared. "Wait till I get my paws around that scrawny neck—"

He noticed his son's anxious face and chuckled. "The bitch is head-over-heels in love with you, boy. She'll have nothing more to do with the rest of us poor humans, I'll stake my hat on that."

Misha smiled, for he'd dreamed of this. "Then I'll be dancing with her, won't I, Papa? I'll have to dance with her like the American."

"We'll see. You'd be taking on a helluva task. And she may yet accept a proper mate—"

Misha wanted to leap into the air and pirouette with mad happiness. He would dance with the crane; he was certain of the fact, for the great birds mate for life.

And in her fourth year, having come of age, Little Queenie had chosen.

"And what about school, eh?" Mama brushed a prematurely grey curl from her cheek as she spoke. "How is he to keep up with his studies, spending the next two months in the crane shed? Would you mind explaining, Petya?"

Papa puffed on his foul-smelling cigarette and shrugged while Misha bent nervously over the scrapbook in his lap, the photographs of his hero blurring before his eyes. "For heaven's sake, Sofya, what would you have me do?" Papa asked slowly. "I can't spend six months on a single bird, and I can't convince the Soviet to send me an assistant to dance with a crane! If Misha can coax this bird to lay, we're that much further toward saving the species."

"And what about your own son, eh? What about saving your son from this God-forsaken wilderness?"

"Sofya, please—"

The adults went round and round, mouths flapping like crazy wings. Misha stared hard at the grainy newsprint reproduction of the American George Archibald dancing with the whooping crane called Tex. Like the Siberian, like the Manchurian, like every species of white crane everywhere, the whoopers hovered near extinction. Even disturbed birds were required to reproduce. Females reluctant to breed could be artificially inseminated, but the shot hadn't been invented that could force them to lay eggs and start a family. Only the security rooted in the ancient ritual of the mating dance would stimulate ovulation. And if the crane happened to be imprinted on people, the partner had to be a human male . . .



George Archibald had spent five weeks dancing with Tex, helping her construct her twig nest, sleeping next to her at night. He was rewarded when the hen produced her first successful egg in sixteen years of existence, after nearly a decade of artificial insemination alone had failed. The American had named the fluffy miracle Gee Whiz.

Misha dreamed of his own chick-to-be, Little Queenie's child. If only Mama allowed the dancing . . .

A few days after this conversation, Sofya Bezukhovna inquired about the status of her internal passport. She'd applied for a visa some time ago, in order to see her sister in Leningrad, but the visiting dignitaries and their rumors of hush-hush experiment had necessitated confining the villagers to the immediate area. But with the recent exodus of most of the party personnel and the top geneticists, it seemed safe to assume that the plans had fallen through and extreme security measures were no longer required.

So it was quite a shock to discover that her line of reasoning was incorrect.

"What exactly is the problem, please?" she asked the heavy-lidded official in charge of documents.

"All visas have been revoked, madam. I don't know why." He shoved the papers at her so that she could see for herself the dark black letters stamped across the application: DENIED.

"But don't they have to give a reason? This isn't America, you know!"

The man blinked at her dispassionately.

"Please, I'd like to visit my sister before the second coming. What am I to do?"

The official shrugged with vast expenditure of energy. "No one is to go in or out until further notice."

"The bigwigs got out," she commented nastily. "Am I supposed to cross your palms with silver?"

"They cannot re-enter. They've been relocated to another high security installation to the south. And since their exit, no one else has been permitted to either leave or return. So, alas, I must decline your kind offer . . ."

Sofya Bezukhovna twisted her wandering curl savagely. "This is intolerable. And you have no idea why?"

"I just work here, Madam."

Human centered Queenie staked out her summer territory less than half a kilometer away from the winter quarters in Shed 9. She rejected the advances of each male crane that approached, and after a time she received no more proposals. She stood haughty and alone as the rest of the adult Siberians paired up and scattered across the marshland preserve to begin their families.

This balmy spring day, Misha cut his afternoon classes and headed out toward Queenie's plot, vague daydreams buzzing before his eyes. He'd found it impossible to concentrate on calculus with visions of the crane-dance burning in his skull.

"I'm home early, girl," he called as he spotted the solitary stick figure of his bird rising from the mud-green grass.

The crane lowered her head in a graceful bow, then leapt. Misha aped her, his clumsy movements a distant reflection of her fluidity. She danced, he clumped; she pirouetted, he spun; she arched backward, he plunked onto his behind.

"Ah, girl," he gasped from the ground. "I'm afraid I haven't quite got it down yet."

The great bird walked stiff-legged toward the boy, puzzled by this unorthodox conclusion to the dance. Picking up a twig, she thrust it toward him like a question.

Misha got home just as Mama was setting out the vegetable stew. "Mama, Papa!" he cried. "Queenie's starting her nest!"

"That's good," Mama said, her voice tight and distracted. Misha tensed, wondering if his truancy had already been reported. He bent over his bowl, picking out the potatoes.

"What could it be, Petya?" his mother asked suddenly. "Might it be that they're so anxious to keep the 'dodo' operation under wraps that—"

"Sofya." Papa nodded at Misha. "Later."

Mystified but relieved—clearly, it wasn't his own misdemeanors that had his parents so concerned—Misha ventured the second half of the question he'd asked several days before. "Papa? Remember the other day when I asked why they were making dodos and you said you didn't know? Well, do you know *how*?"

A rich chuckle escaped the dark beard. "Better ask your mother that one, son."

Sofya Bezukhovna dropped her spoon. "I rather doubt they're making dodos in a top secret lab, Misha. Seldom has any bird other than the carrier pigeon had much to do with national securi-

ty. Still, should one want to resurrect the dodo, there might be a way . . ." Her eyes became reflective mirrors as her voice trailed off.

Musing, she made a temple of her fingers. "Viruses, tailor-made viruses . . . Certainly, judging by the patients I see, we had more than enough virologists and geneticists, at least before the big exodus . . . Ten of them for every ornithologist, I'll wager!"

"You're rambling, Sofya!" Papa said, his laughter subtly strained.

"What do viruses have to do with dodos, Mama?" Misha asked.

"Oh, nothing, probably . . . But here's my theory. Suppose our intrepid crew actually did wish to make a dodo. The natural thing for our good geneticists to try is to tailor-make a virus carrying specific instructions for altering the genetic code of some other bird, perhaps a dove. If the virus was properly programmed, it would attack the DNA in the dove's cells, replacing the old genetic code with its own string of RNA and DNA . . . Whenever an old cell wore out, the dove's body would read the altered message and replace the aged dove cell with a brand new dodo cell. After a time, all of the original cells would have been exchanged for those of the usurpers. And *voilà*, we have a dodo!"

Misha felt confused. Of course, they'd had all this RNA and DNA genetic code business in school, but it didn't seem to be coming back to him the way it should. He thought restlessly of Queenie. "Think I'll run by the crane shed. Be back in an hour." He rinsed out his bowl, grabbed his sweater, and left.

Pyotr Mikhailovich smiled faintly at the slamming door. "Ah, to be young again, to believe in dodos rather than genetic warfare!"

"His naiveté worries me sometimes, Petya. I doubt there's another child his age in the entire village who swallows that silly tale."

"What he doesn't know, he can't mention to the wrong person—"

Sofya Bezukhovna snorted. "If we Siberians can't speak freely, who can? For my part, I think it's high time we were told why we can't leave this village. Obviously, there's no big experiment going on nor likely to be either, not with all the best people cleared out. Some bureaucrat's mistake has us penned in like rats in a cage!"

The image snagged in the man's mind like the foreshadowing of a death.

The next evening, Misha and his father gave little Queenie her first artificial insemination of the season. She didn't much like being probed with the big needle, but Misha gentled her with soothing hands and voice. "It's all right, my girl. This old shot is what I told you about yesterday. You want to have lots of little chicks, don't you? Wouldn't you like that?" He droned on about the joys of parenthood while Papa shot the sperm deeply into the bird's cloaca.

"There, all done." Misha released the crane and she promptly stalked off with her feathers in disarray. "Damaged your pride, have we?" The bird shook her ruffled wings violently.

"Sometimes I'd swear that bird understands Russian," Papa said.

"Oh, she does, Papa. I know she does."

The man smiled. "Hell, son, you may be right."

The two humans watched Queenie prance off into the square of marsh she'd claimed for her own. The setting sun stained her plumage a soft rose. At length, Papa grasped Misha by the shoulder and propelled him gently after her. "Scoot, son. There's a lady waiting for a dance."

Misha skipped away, wordless with delight. The hordes of mosquitoes that trailed him troubled him as little as butterflies.

Some three days later, afternoon classes were cancelled so that the adults could help fight an enormous fire that had erupted in lab number three. Misha felt sick when the teacher dismissed them, for he'd often visited that station with his father. The boy pictured the rows of closely confined chickens and pigeons smothering helplessly as they fought to extract oxygen from gas-filled air. And then an alternate image blazed in his mind as sharply as a photograph: endless cages of charred, unmoving bodies.

"How could they have been so stupid!" Sofya Bezukhova trembled with passionate anger as she stirred the turnip soup. "Do you know what caused the fire to flare up out of control, did you hear, Petya?"

He nodded grimly, but Misha was the one who spoke. "I didn't, Mama. What happened?"

"Some—unspeakable idiot had been cleaning cages with rags

soaked in gasoline—"

"But that could have poisoned the birds!" Misha interrupted, astonished. "Everybody knows that . . ."

"Oh, that's the least of it, my son. You see, when this genius had finished, he tossed the rags into a convenient corner. From what they were saying, the workers had been passing the heap for days, everyone was waiting for someone else to do something about it. Morons! They waited too damn long. At last someone threw a cigarette on the new trash pile . . ." She shook her head, infuriated, personally outraged by the accident. "Burns all over six people. Two others dead. And why? Because no one had the time to take out the garbage."

"Sofya," Papa said, his voice tender.

"Oh, Petya, I felt so helpless." She dropped the ladle and turned to her husband with pleading eyes. "What happened to me out there? Kitty Renovna shouldn't have died. She wasn't that badly burned. I botched it."

"Sofya, no. You did what you could."

"I botched it. I killed her."

"No. Hush."

The soup bubbled over the confines of the big iron pot, the burner flames sizzling as the thick liquid oozed downward. Misha went silently to salvage what he could of the mess.

His mother, strangely, was crying.

The news that Little Queenie had laid her first egg was buried under a wave of annoyances that suddenly engulfed the village. Sofya Bezukhovna gained the ear of the few party members still residing there as these worthies realized that full summer had arrived without notice of expected holidays in Novgorod. But as yet their effort had netted meager results. Frantic calls to Vladivostok or even Moscow were met with cool nonsense at the other end of the line. No one seemed to know why or when the railroads had ceased to stop in town. Requests for necessary supplies were answered with vague replies: fill out this form, post that application. No one appeared able to comprehend the simple fact that not even mail left the village nowadays.

And as if all this weren't worry enough, a series of accidents descended upon the village. The fire in lab 3 had signaled some demon of ill fortune, for all at once electrocutions, chemical poisonings, and mysterious explosions had become daily events.

Tragedy was part and parcel of normal existence, for hardly a family had not had a loss. The small complement of overworked doctors and nurses were forced to enlist the aid of the more knowledgeable biologists and veterinarians, but oftentimes even the most superbly trained personnel seemed like fumble-fingered butchers. And matters could only grow worse. Medical supplies were running dangerously low.

Misha capitalized on the distractions confronting his elders to grant himself an extended holiday from school to work with Queenie. He might as well, he thought. These last few weeks he'd understood nothing and remembered less. "I'm stupid, that's all," he concluded, and his mind closed like a door against further education.

Papa surely noticed, but he said nothing. When the boy presented him with Queenie's first egg, the man smiled through his dark beard and delivered the precious object to an incubator in lab 5. Misha replaced it with a porcelain imitation of the same size, cradling it in his arms whenever the crane needed a break, for such attention might induce the Siberian to lay a second time.

Three days after the egg had been placed in the incubator, all electrical power to lab 5 was lost for twelve hours. No one thought to move the cooling egg to another building. The tiny life inside expired, and the cold ovoid was eventually discarded.

Misha wasn't told. No one remembered to inform his father.

Pyotr Mikhailovich entered the yard cautiously, but Queenie didn't seem to be anywhere about. She'd probably wandered off to hunt or fish, for Misha slept by the twig nest, his nerveless body curled around the porcelain egg. The man reached down to tap the boy on the shoulder. Jumping, Misha clutched the egg protectively to his chest.

"Why didn't you come home for dinner last night, son?"

Misha shrugged. "I ate here."

"Here?"

Impatiently, as if it should be obvious, the boy elaborated. "Queenie caught some fish."

The man studied his son uneasily. "But how did you cook it, Misha?" he asked at last. "You surely didn't eat it raw?"

The question meant nothing to the boy. "Raw?" he echoed, tasting the word on his tongue. A horned beast slammed into Pyotr Mikhailovich's belly.

"You're sick, Misha. We must go to your mother at once."

The boy stared past his father weirdly. "Don't be silly, Papa. I can't go anywhere. I have to watch the egg until Queenie gets back."

He watched himself grab his son as if viewing the actions of another man. The egg slipped through Misha's fingers, falling forever before it connected with the floor. Misha uttered an inhuman cry.

"You'd think it was a damn Faberge, the way you're carrying on—" Cursing, Pyotr Mikhailovich dragged his son bodily toward the gate. Then something sharp pierced his hand, forcing him to release Misha with a roar of rage.

The crane yanked her bill from the man's flesh. He saw that the first two inches were stained bright red. Then she snaked her neck around and aimed higher, at the eyes. Abandoning dignity, Pyotr leapt the fence.

Boy and crane regarded him with alien eyes. He backed away dumbly, holding his injured hand, almost hearing the bird's vicious thought: *Lucky for you my wing is pinioned . . .*

Sometime later he found himself at his wife's deserted office, reading and re-reading a note tacked to the door. Pain and nausea prevented him from assimilating its meaning, and not even the receptionist remained to tell him where everyone had gone. He wandered out again into the street. By chance or instinct, he wound up where the message would have directed him—the hospital.

Without pausing, he entered into hell.

Pyotr Mikhailovich immediately spotted two people dead in their chairs, as well as a third who'd arrived too late for such comfort and had been forced to expire in a corner on the floor. Most of the still-living were bleeding profusely through impromptu bandages of cheap torn cloth. Evidence of war, such mass carnage . . . Yet all about him people were discussing a dozen different accidents. He didn't understand. Only one thing was clear; his slight wound wouldn't grant him instant access to his wife. Guilt slapped at him as he shut out the angry hurting eyes and pushed on past the receptionist.

Sofya Bezukhovna raged in a ward full of corpses. The only other living creature present, a sobbing nurse, stood with twisted face to the wall. The doctor shook with fury as she tended to the bed at the far end of the hall.

"You will be shot, Lena Pavlovna, even if I have to do it myself. You've poisoned every last one of them."

"A mistake—" the nurse moaned. "The hours have made me stupid; I'm so tired—"

"Criminally stupid." Sofya Bezukhovna dismissed her with an angry gesture, then turned to her husband as if he'd been loitering there all along. "Well? Are you going to hang around propping up walls until hell freezes over, or are you going to clear away these bodies so that I can use these beds?"

He fell to mindless labor. Not for several hours did he recall why he'd come.

At that point he was sharing a cigarette with his wife as they rested outside the hospital facing the dawn. His thoughts were running together or running down. But all at once he knew he'd meant to tell her something.

"We've all got it, I think."

She looked at him sharply. "All got what?"

"The in—infection."

"What infection?" She inhaled deeply when she smoked, savoring the small luxury she so seldom allowed herself. "You mean imperialism? Like the saboteurs?"

He admired the way she hadn't let weariness slur her speech. He could never now tackle "imperialism." At last he ventured a simple, "What do you mean?"

"You think all this is just a random series of accidents? The village closed off, catastrophe everywhere? Ha! Stands to reason there's someone behind this. Imperialist saboteurs, or I'm not Sofya Bezukhovna."

Of course. He thought her argument sensible. But his gut persisted in postulating an alternate story. "I think we're all sick, Sofya. You should have seen Misha—"

Sharply: "What's wrong with Misha?"

"He's acting oddly. He ate some raw fish."

"A vermifuge then." She nodded competently, concealing the alarm snaking about her heart. Vermifuge. Was that the right word?

"Can you make enough for all of us? Will that prevent the strange behavior?"

"It will prevent worms . . . What strange behavior? Are you trying to drive me out of my skull?"

Put on the spot, he squirmed. What strange behavior, indeed?



Could he really think of anything that wasn't perfectly natural under stress? Yet he knew at some point he'd concluded an insidious illness was sweeping the village . . .

Phrases danced in his mind: *We are the dodos, we are the rats in the big experiment* . . . But he'd no idea of what he meant. "We must leave the village," he said lamely. "Something's very wrong."

"I'm sure once this mess is straightened out and the saboteurs caught, we'll get our passports back—"

"This is beyond passports, Sofya. We must leave at once. On foot, if need be."

"But why on earth?"

"There's something wrong—" He spread his hands, unable to explain.

She shrugged, puzzled by his inarticulate intensity. "I'm a doctor, Petya. How can I just stroll off into the taiga?"

She was right, of course. He wasn't thinking. And it was impossible to convey his sense of urgency to another person, not without use of the logic and reason that had slipped away from him. He stared down at the soggy ground, his lips moving slightly as he groped for words. He didn't realize what Sofya Bezukhovna saw: a suddenly senile old man, mumbling impotently into his beard. He didn't understand why she abruptly turned away.

It didn't matter. All he wanted now was sleep.

Things happened in bits and pieces from there on out. Like lightning, self-awareness was but an occasional visitor to the interior blackness of Pyotr Mikhailovich's skull, only momentarily illuminating some dim conclusion that hovered at the horizon of consciousness. Otherwise darkness. He did what he had to do, stepping through the motions of saving Misha with the enthusiasm of an automaton, incapable of understanding if he were doing the right thing or the best thing or anything at all.

First he slept, in a lonely cabin bereft of wife and son. Then he prepared a pack: food, water, first aid kit, insect repellent. Once, when a spark fluttered briefly in his brain, he searched for the two-way radio, but it had vanished. He was never to recall the petty official working on orders wired in from Moscow, an apologetic man embarrassed by the necessity of confiscating all such equipment from the villagers.

After another hazy interval, the man stood on the far side

of the fence aiming his tranquilizer gun at Little Queenie. She fell with a voiceless cry, for unlike most cranes, Siberians are unable to whoop and hoot. Misha must have been alert indeed, for her slight gasp was enough to bring him running from the shed.

"Papa!" he croaked, as if in terrible pain. He knelt by the bird and cradled her head in his arms.

The man swung over the fence and walked over to the boy, tapping him gently on the shoulder. "We go now. Come."

His son followed, with black eyes.

The clouds descended and broke again. The two of them were trekking silently across an unidentifiable stretch of flat terrain. How far had they gone? The nearest village, Seyat, was almost fifty kilometers to the south. Pyotr Mikhailovich chastised himself as he suddenly realized that he should have packed a tent.

Darkness and then light. He found himself before a violently barbed-wire fence that stretched to infinity in both directions. He'd lost Misha somewhere. What now? What to do? He noticed a sign, an imposing white rectangle inscribed with bold strokes of red and black. Maybe that would tell him.

But drawing near, he saw the bright words were nonsense syllables that meant nothing. He took out his ax and began to hack away at the fence, not really sure of why he must go on, just knowing that for some reason he thought it might be a good idea to start chopping.

A small second sun appeared briefly on the southeastern horizon. No one in the village noticed.

Misha hadn't seen another human face for an indefinite period, but he didn't wonder about that anymore. He went about his duties in the crane shed, living for the moments when Queenie gave him his turn at the egg.

Now, as he warmed it in his arms, he heard faint tapping from within. An inchoate joy welled in his heart; oh, he'd been happy enough this past month, just as he'd always managed to be happy, but this ... He croaked wordlessly and the great crane entered the shed with measured grace. Together they listened to the embryo as it knocked on the egg like a door.

A small bit of shell erupted triumphantly, and the unseen chick collapsed into slumber. Crane and boy relaxed marginally. The vigil had just begun ...

The sun had set and risen again before the wet, ugly baby

popped out into the twig nest. Misha's soul sang as he studied the rare infant. Queenie had moved a little away, to allow the chick to dry and rest quietly, but the boy couldn't resist. He picked it up gingerly and cupped it in his hand. Lifting its head a weary fraction, the hatchling cocked a questioning eye toward Misha.

Then it slipped off into sleep, completely trusting, completely secure, kept warm by the heat of its father's body.

# Flicker

by PATRICIA H. BARRETT

A modern  
*Christmas Carol.*

## I

Peveril did not begin his tenancy in the house in Camden Town as a squatter. This fact must be distinctly understood, lest you begin to suspect certain persons of having motives, pecuniary or otherwise, for wishing him ill. Nor, to anyone's knowledge (in this century, at any rate), did the house have a particularly unsavory reputation. It was, in fact, a large and rather ugly Victorian townhouse, down on its luck.

It did not brood defiantly through dusty, half-lidded windows, nor did it peer furtively over its menacing black iron fence, nor did it exude an atmosphere of evil which caused its yew hedge to yellow and its sparse grass verge to wither and die, nor did it cunningly thrust up a paving stone or an errant brick in the stair to trip the unwary. It did none of these things, I promise you, in spite of what people were to say of it later. It simply sat on its allotment, as did its neighbors, growing a bit shabbier and more forlorn as time went on, sheltering a series of tenants who seemed to decline in refinement and delicacy with every new lease until, at length, it fell vacant. It remained in this sorry state for several years, until a gentleman by the name of Dunwaithe purchased it from someone who seemed to be distantly related to the original owner.

In short order, he converted it to flats, which he rented at scandalously high rates to a wild array of the Empire's far-flung

denizens. The house became, if anything, a bit pathetic after that. Its stolid walls—which had been a bastion, one presumed, for a series of arrogant and overfed Victorian patriarchies—reverberated now with the dark rhythms and the soft, slurring patois of a dozen former Protectorates. The rooms and passageways which had formerly been scented with lemon verbena, wood polish, and cigar smoke were filled now with the aromas of African pepper, curry, lamb, ganja, urine, and grease. The Empire had seemingly imploded, and ironically, its refugees had taken shelter here among the peonied wallpaper; the xenophobic fears of a Kiplingesque army had been justified.

A succession of Pakistani medical technicians, Nigerian students, dreadlocked Rastafarians, South African poets, and West Indian bus conductors had moved in, bought wing chairs and gas rings, and proceeded to become English. The faded flowers on the walls in the front passageway were soon covered by FAR and RAS pronouncements, handbills announcing anti-National Front rallies and Nuclear Disarmament Sundays and multi-lingual graffiti.

It was to this house that Peveril had come in search of lodgings, and it was in this milieu that he had set up housekeeping. Above this milieu would, perhaps, be a more correct way of putting it, for he had rented a small warren of rooms at the top of the house. So, you see, despite what people were to say of it later, there was nothing inherently sinister about the place. Nothing at all.

The fact was that it was Peveril himself who seemed to haunt the house, if anyone could be said to haunt it. His fellow tenants knew him as little more than a creaking floorboard or a stifled groan heard overhead by day, and an indistinct, heavily draped figure seen gliding down the stairs and along the dimly lit passageways by night.

He was suffering at this time from a severe emotional shock, brought about by his wife having given him the boot. She had married him for his exceptional (if somewhat effeminate) good looks and had divorced him several months later, having become surfeited with looking at him.

Peveril had adored married life. He had found it full of small jobs and activities, and he did so love to putter about. They had purchased a small, detached house in Crawley (to which his wife had retained the key after their estrangement) which he began covering in William Morris wallpapers and surrounding with herb-

aceous borders. He had asked her quite solicitously over the morning papers one Sunday whether she thought that they should begin fitting the box room up for a nursery when she calmly set her teacup down and ordered him out.

If anything, divorce seemed to enhance his appearance. Loss of appetite made his cheekbones more prominent, feverishness made his cheek more ruddy and his eye brighter. Sitting snugly at the top of the house in Camden Town, fussed over by his friends and invited to endless suppers and drinks parties by well-meaning people who feared that he brooded if left alone, he began to quite enjoy suffering. Later, stories began to circulate about his uneasiness with the house from the first. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

Unlike most of his acquaintances, who were constantly in pursuit of one another's wives, or who coveted one another's success or money or celebrity, Peveril was that most clandestine of creatures, the closet domestic. He adored browsing in the housewares department at Marks and Spencer. He could dream away whole afternoons among the curtain materials at Laura Ashley's. His great misfortune had been to marry Naobe, a woman who enjoyed living in surroundings best described as squalid. She felt somehow that they enhanced her writing abilities, such as they were.

None of Peveril's friends had approved of her, finding her just too affected even to mingle among them. There had been a great party to which Peveril had been carried bodily when she made it known that she intended to dissolve the marriage. She had been so disliked that not one of his friends had even attempted to have an affair with her, a thing unheard of in their literary, musical, political clique.

Peveril had been heartbroken at the dissolution, although even he had begun to wonder if, perhaps, it was the institution of marriage itself which held the appeal, and not the woman he had chosen.

He had spied a FLAT TO LET sign in the window of the house in Camden Town on the very day that his wife had evicted him. Within the week, he had humped his few precious possessions into the attic rooms and set up housekeeping.

In similar fashion, mention was always made later of the disappearance of the building's present owner, Mr. Dunwaithe. Some simple inquiries among his creditors quickly debunk any air of mystery surrounding his disappearance. Nor did he drop out

of sight suddenly as was reported by some; he seemed to disappear gradually, or rather his absences became more frequent, and of longer and longer duration.

Mr. Dunwaithe had lived in a large flat at the front of the house. Slowly, it was noted, its windows ceased their solemn watchfulness, clouded over with a glaucoma of dust and neglect. This fact was still being assimilated by his tenants when the power was turned off. In short order, this was followed by the remaining amenities, and finally by the tenants themselves, taking with them their sounds and scents until, one midsummer morning, Peveril awoke to the realization that he was the sole occupant of the house.

It was some weeks before he accepted the finality of this situation. Having come from a large and loquacious Anglo-Irish family, and having paused briefly in a marriage which had been, if possible, more noisome and certainly more acrimonious than any sibling rivalry, he had found his downstairs neighbors greatly to his liking. He lived snugly and solitarily at the top of the house, bound to his fellow tenants by the bass line of the music which vibrated in his floors and the esoteric scents which occasionally drifted up to him in the evenings. His writing had progressed, his bank account had burgeoned; he was, in short, developing a genuine fondness for his solitary life style. Oblivious to the decay of the house, he had taken the departure of its tenants as a personal betrayal, a rebuff. They had been a comfort, like unmet friends.

He carried on in his upstairs rooms for weeks, never broaching the threshold of any of the now-empty rooms below. His first faint proddings of proprietary interest began on the exterior of the house.

Peveril began to trim the yew hedge and to putter about in the back allotment, just to keep the place from looking neglected and attracting squatters. This soon led to his repainting the black iron fence and polishing the brass fixtures on the front door. By the time a heat wave struck in August, rendering his warren of tiny rooms unbearable, his curiosity had also been sufficiently aroused. Only then did he recant of his laissez-faire policy and begin to explore the remainder of the house.

He had been shocked by its emptiness. The previous tenants had left nothing whatever behind. Like any nomadic horde, they seemed to live with great economy of possession and on decamp-

ing had taken along all signs of their duration. Even their scents were gone, quickly overlaid by the dank smell of unused rooms in a river city. Only in what had once been the drawing room, where an elderly widow had occupied a bed-sit, was anything left behind. She had abandoned several hundred pounds of old newspapers, dessicated as mummies, and an unpleasant scent which seemed to combine decayed teeth, camphor, and cats.

With trepidation at first but with increasing confidence as the weeks went by, Peveril set about restoring some of the house's tarnished dignity. He borrowed shamelessly from the lumber room, which was crammed with antiquated furniture, rotting curtains, and curious nineteenth-century erotic lithographs, augmenting them with pieces that he foraged from antique shops, flea markets, and estate sales. He indulged his passion for Victoriana to the means that his budget would allow, and in turn their passion for Orientalia until chinoiserie, japonaiserie, Godwin imitations, and intricate silk hangings filled the house to bulging.

He longed devoutly to reconcile the house with the power station, but he feared that some zealous young technocrat would, on checking, discover that the premises were not his own and promptly initiate proceedings to have him dislodged. Oil lamps and candlelight sufficed him, therefore, and added to the house's Victorian charm and inconvenience. As November drew on, he did request that some person from the Coal Board pay a call on his cellar, but he did not equate colliers with technocrats, and he managed to conduct the transaction in cash.

Thus, it was in this situation that his friend Harold found him when, having spent an unabashed evening in the company of his cronies, drinking toast after toast to the approaching Yule and the waning year, Harold had discovered himself to be too abashed to go home to his wife.

## II

At the best of times, Peveril tended to resemble a Victorian Whitechapel whore, and this Christmas Eve morning was, decidedly, not one of his better times. He had arrived home shortly before three and had tumbled into bed still in full evening regalia, the beginnings of a horrendous morning-after already amassing inside of him like a great galleon nimbus. He was awakened shortly before eight by a clamor of dustbins and break-glass, and lay for several long moments while the bed pitched



and yawed and the furniture scrambled about, attempting to regain its customary position and staid composure.

The dressing table's stiff-legged gait had made a jumble of his toilet articles, he noted, while the wardrobe had apparently exploded from its exertions, strewing Peveril's exotic apparel about the room in a scene reminiscent of a tragedy at a fashion show. He was about to turn his face to the wall and pretend to ignore this domestic turbulence in favor of a few more hours of restorative sleep when he heard the kitchen furniture begin to move about. It was then that he remembered that he had acquired a houseguest on the previous evening (albeit only Harold), and being a solicitous host at the worst of times (and this certainly qualified as one of them) he decided to attempt to face the day.

He began his morning ablutions by retching violently for several minutes, bringing up great fluffy meringues of yellowish bile. His initial confrontation with the mirror on the medicine cabinet shocked him badly, and he was already in the process of running down the guest list of last night's fête in an effort to recall who might have had just cause to cosh him repeatedly about the face when he realized that what at first blush appeared to be bruises were only the remnants of his mascara. He did his best to repair the damage, hampered by the fact that his brain seemed not to be on speaking terms with his trembling fingers. At last, easing his inflamed nerve endings into a silk dressing gown and losing his balance momentarily as he bent to retrieve his slippers, he pattered off in search of Harold.

He found his friend in the kitchen, eating Scotch woodcock. "Good morning, Bovril," said Harold.

This term of endearment sent a rush of hot salt beef to the back of Peveril's throat. A wave of nausea swept over him. He sat down abruptly.

"You look like death this morning," said Harold brightly. "Was it a droll evening, then?" Receiving no reply, he fetched a tumbler from the sink, poured out an inch of gin, added a dose of orange juice and set it before Peveril. Peveril eyed him blearily over the rim of the glass.

"It was another of Naobe's book-signing thingies," he said. "She has written another of her feminist novellas, did you know?"

Harold shrugged noncommittally.

"Dissected our marriage all over again. Honestly, Harry, if I'd known that our sacred nuptials were to be nothing more than a research project, I would, perhaps, have taken them a bit less seriously."

"I doubt that," replied Harold. "What's your name in this one?"

"Villiers," Peveril replied, wincing. "William ... bloody ... Villiers."

Harold reached for another slice of Scotch woodcock. The room about them had begun to lighten, filling with chill Brueghelian northern light. An open window above the sink allowed several chill breezes to enter; like the specters of small children they crowded about, spilling incorporeal treasures from their pockets; there were scents of naphtha and of diesel fumes, of the huge, lovely, greasy breakfasts being eaten in the neighborhood, of bacon and butter, and bishop's cake and tea; there were scents of chill nearly frozen tilth and of moisture in the air (indeed, there was a hush of expectancy in the morning traffic sounds; snow, most definitely, for Christmas) and, underlying all, the faint, dark, restless scent of the river.

Peveril shivered.

"I miss my wife," was all he said.

When she had been with him, he had touched her so often that she had become annoyed, and eventually enraged. She had put him out quite abruptly, and had thereafter ceased to think of him, except anecdotally.

Harold rose, closed the window and fetched Peveril a cup of tea. Busying himself with the washing up, he asked lightly, "Was my wife there last night?"

Peveril smiled. "She was."

"Alone?"

"Accompanied by dear Mr. Meldon, who applied earnest and meaningful pressure to her hand incessantly, but to no avail I'm afraid. She left unescorted."

Harold sat down across the table from his friend.

"I was a rotter last night, Pevvie," he said. "I usually am, you know."

The two sat in silence for a long moment until Peveril raised his head and eyed his friend appraisingly.

"Oh, for God's sake," he said abruptly. "It's Christmas Eve. Go home and make it up to her. I have masses of things to do

today, and I positively cannot work when I am confronted by the sight of your despondent form draped over the divan every time I traverse the front hall. I refuse to allow you to lie about sighing and clutching the accent pillows until they are quite out of shape. In a word, Harry, leave."

Harold smiled gratefully.

"I will, then," he said. "I'll just pop 'round to the phone box in the park and ask her to come and fetch me."

He rose.

Peveril leaned back in his chair. His hangover had begun to clear, and he was suddenly ravenously hungry. He got up and began to put together an omelet.

Harold returned shortly, smiling happily.

"She's coming, Pevvie," he said. "She doesn't even sound terribly angry. She really is a love, isn't she?"

"I'm sure she is," said Peveril. "But she's probably also developed an immunity to you. It was something that Naobe just couldn't seem to cultivate in my case." He set a huge plate of eggs before Harold and seated himself before another. "Happy Christmas, Harry," he said suddenly, and he smiled for the first time that day.

"Happy Christmas, Bovril," said Harold. This time, the term of endearment didn't bother Peveril at all.

### III

"Merry Christmas, Peveril! Here you go, don't drop it. Harry picked them up in that shop over in the King's Road. You know how they can be about returning things, so I do hope you like them. Where is he, by the way? Ah, here he comes! We'll see you for dinner on Thursday, then. Thanks ever so, love, for minding him for me last night. Give us a kiss, then. Bye!"

With this outpouring of words, Olivia Foxe breezed into the front hallway, deposited a huge, gilt-wrapped, red-beribboned box in Peveril's arms, kissed him full on the mouth, buttoned Harold's coat up about his throat, and ushered him out to the car.

Harold was smiling a bit idiotically, Peveril thought. He positively adored being looked after, and Livvie was so nurturing! Peveril raised his hand in a gesture of farewell, but Harold wasn't looking. He was excitedly relating his last evening's misdeeds with the enthusiasm of a Girl Guide just home from a walking tour. Peveril closed the door.

He took the gold box into the front room. It was accompanied by a large red envelope. Since there was no witness to his greed, he decided to open the present first.

It contained a great deal of old newsprint. Beneath this, a curve, a glint, the tinkle of glass; he drew forth a pair of exquisite lamps, cast in bronze and depicting a pair of water sylphs. Clad only in their streaming hair, they held aloft two vessels, from which poured a stream of sparkling crystal beads which caught the firelight and sent it glancing about the room. Once gas fixtures, they had apparently been converted to electrical fixtures at some point in the past.

Peveril sighed. Now more than ever he wished that he could come to some arrangement with the electrical facilities. Setting the two lovely naiads aside, he turned to the accompanying card. It was written in Livvie's charming, eccentric, American script:

*Once again, Peveril, Merry Christmas! it said. Queen Victoria may have been dead, but she was probably only a little moldy when these were cast, according to Harry. He chose them for their delicacy and grace, even if they are a trifle late for your tastes.*

*As you have probably noticed, they are electric lamps—I put the bulbs in a tissue paper packet to one side—did you notice them?*

*Ah, but, you say, "I have no power. The government and I are at odds over the ownership of this crumbling pile ..."*

*Well, take heart, dear fellow. Harry has arranged for a person by the rather improbable name of Flicker to stop 'round at six p.m. today to reconcile you with the power station. He says that you will be required to compensate this person, but that his "fee" should amuse you. (I hope that this is clear to you, since I have no idea at all as to what he is talking about.)*

*With love and best wishes for a glorious holiday, Harry and Olivia.*

Peveril laid the note aside. He sat contemplating the two lovely figures at his elbow. The room—was it a Northern exposure?—felt cold and damp. There seemed to be a disagreeable scent of colorless things growing beneath the wallpaper, and the thick, wavering panes of glass and heavy draperies merely hinted at daylight. The lamps seemed to have diminished in size, absorbing what little light was to be had, their hard bronze flesh contracting to contain it. He replaced them carefully in their golden box.

He was afraid.

#### IV

For the first time in his life, Harold Foxe was off the dole for the holidays. In the past twelve months he had not only made something of a commercial success of his music, but he had married quite well, a fact which still astounded his friends and relations. His wife, a serene woman ten years his senior, seemed not to notice his rather bizarre "political" appearance, but rather treated him as if he were a bank clerk or a civil servant.

During the week before Christmas, Harold had bullied Thommie Meldon into going Christmas shopping with him. The day had been a chill one, alternately raining and sleeting, darkening early, and turning even colder.

He had spied Peveril's lamps in a shop window, just as the shop owner was closing for the evening. The transaction had been a fast one, and they had trudged off in search of a cab just as the first flakes of snow began to mingle with the sleet. Laden with bags and parcels, their coats heavy with moisture, they had directed it to their customary pub.

Settled snugly near the electric fire while their coats steamed on the rack, they ordered two brimming pints and settled back to continue their year-old argument.

"You're still seeing my wife on the side, aren't you?" asked Harold, wiping foam from his upper lip.

"I am," Meldon replied.

Harold examined the amber liquid in his glass minutely. "I don't know what to do with you, I really don't," he said. "My oldest friend, my dole line companion, my . . ."

"Give it a rest," Meldon replied calmly. "You know you don't deserve her. She'd put you out, but she's afraid that you'd die of exposure if she did. She knows how incompetent you are."

"Not where it counts." Harold was grinning.

"That's another thing. She says you've given her the clap twice in the past six months. She asked me to speak to you about it."

"I apologized," Harold said forlornly. "I suppose I am a bit of a profligate. I do sometimes wonder why she puts up with me. It's the only irrational thing I've ever known her to do."

"I should take her away from you," said Meldon.

"She wouldn't go," his friend replied. "She says you amuse her and that you're comforting to be with. She says that you're a dar-

ling, but that you have exposed yourself so totally in your interminable little tête à tête that physical intimacy would only be an embarrassment at this point." He grinned wickedly.

Meldon grinned back. "She said that?"

"Words to that effect."

They sat in the afterglow of their amusement for a bit. Neither of them really wished to know how much of what the other said was true.

Two more pints were set before them, and their subject changed.

"What exactly are these?" asked Meldon, drawing the box from the antique dealer's shop from the mound of parcels. "You said that they're for Peveril?"

Harold nodded. "Don't you like them?"

Meldon shrugged. "Bit poufy for my taste," he said. "Nasty little joke when he finds out that they're electric. Him in that drafty old hole with no power."

"I plan to take care of that," said Harold. He was peering into the recesses of his glass with what appeared to Meldon to be a deliberate attempt to avoid eye contact. Meldon shifted uncomfortably.

"How?" he asked.

"Flicker," said Harold. He raised his eyes. Meldon was plainly horrified.

"Bloody awful thing to do to him, innit? And at Christmas time! Christ!"

"Come off it," Harold snorted. "You don't actually believe . . ."

Meldon had reached across the table to lay a restraining hand on his arm. "I do. I do believe. I believe everything I hear about the little blighter. He knows things, Harry. Horrible things. And when he taps into the power lines for you, he makes you listen. And once he's told you . . . it's like . . . it's real. They . . ."

"They what?" Harold mocked him. "Jump out of the linen cupboard at you? Leave unspeakable messages scrawled in blood on the walls? Creep beneath the sheets with you and gibber in your ear? What?"

"Something happens." Meldon fumbled in his pocket for a fag, lit it, inhaled deeply. "I've known some blokes who've had him 'round to the squats. He tells 'em a little tale, a little history of the place. Dry as dust, most of his stories are. But always, once he's done it, they're not alone there anymore."

Harold plucked his collar up under his chin in mock horror. "I'm serious," said Meldon sullenly.

"I know you are," said Harold. "That's what makes it so ridiculous." He yawned, rotating his head on his neck. Rising, he slipped into his coat.

"Look," he said. "Flicker is just a ferrety little wanker who happens to have spent his formative years reading facsimiles of the Newgate Calendar. He knows a lot of weird little facts about a lot of run-down old houses. And he knows how to tap those old houses back into the power station. All he asks in return for the one is that you listen to the other. Is that so bloody awful?"

Meldon pushed back his chair and reached for his coat, eyeing Harold ruefully as he zipped it up.

"Right now that house is all that Peveril has got," he said seriously. "He's taken Naobe's leaving him terribly hard. That house is his refuge. I'd hate to see it poisoned for him by one of Flicker's loathesome tales."

"So would I," said Harold. "But I don't believe it. Any of it." Meldon turned abruptly and started for the door.

The precipitation outside was gelid, something that was not quite rain or snow. It smacked harshly against the pavement, stung faces, solidified on windowpanes and the windscreens of cars and clung precariously to branches like a coating of quicksilver. They parted quickly, their mutual Christmas wishes strained.

Harold managed to hail a cab at the corner. Meldon, walking, felt a chill begin to seek him out, slipping insinuatingly into the back of his collar and laying a cold, wet hand on his wrist. At length he reached his street and began to traverse the gentle parabola of the facade of the building which contained his flat. He ascended the stairs and opened the door, grateful for the warmth and light which leapt spaniellike to greet him. He did not turn, and so he did not see the lurid white face which seemed to float disembodied in the shadows at the far end of the block.

## V

Peveril was sitting in his front parlor writing in his journal and drinking gin. The afternoon was rapidly departing, and he was feeling a bit blue.

My sister must be a masochist,

he wrote.

She was the seventh child of eleven of us and now, married only five years, she has seven of her own children, including two sets of twins! Ah, well, who can say whether she is any the worse for it all, or whether the solitary existence that has befallen me is any better?—and Michael seems a decent enough fellow.

At any rate, they will be stopping here in the morning to fetch me home for the holidays, and I shall be grateful to go, too; this old house seems so terribly empty just now. Christmas is a time which must be spent with children, and since at last count I was an uncle at least two dozen times over, I stand in good stead! In a few days' time, I know that I shall be longing once again for the silence of these empty rooms but just now it seems devoid of its customary charm in spite of its festive Yuletide decorations.

The Yule Log is burning brightly in the hearth—no coal fire tonight!—and the room is filled with the scent of evergreen and the twinkle of holly berries. Outside the sky is darkening as this night of Holy Mysteries approaches. There is sleet, wetness, a cold, biting rain that began this afternoon. Still, if it gets a little colder after dark, we may see a Dickensian dusting of white!

Dear Mr. Dickens! He was ushered in and given a place near the hearth where after my supper I plan to join him, to listen once again to his telling of the misadventures of Mr. Scrooge! I shall perhaps be able to entertain him by the light of an electric lamp this evening.

This brings me to a topic which I have been loathe to mention; still, now I suppose I must.

I am certain that Harry's intentions were of the best sort when he approached a certain individual about the power. And I am equally certain that he places no credence whatsoever in any of the stories which have circulated pertaining to this person. Still, I wish . . .

The door knocker. My God, he's here.

## VI

NO one seemed to know for certain if Flicker was a true albino. He had never been seen in public without a pair of mirrored sunglasses, whether by day or night.

His hair was pure white and downy, like a milkweed pod or a dandelion gone to seed, and his skin had the leucochoic appearance of the filets of some bottom-feeding species of fish. He had no mates, no bird, no clique claimed him as one of its own; his address was unknown to anyone; he frequented no pub or club



or cinema with any degree of regularity. Persons wishing to reach him simply left messages in perhaps a dozen venues south of Westminster Bridge and waited for him to stop in. He seldom spoke with anyone in these establishments; he was, rather, a figure glimpsed from the corner of an eye, the after-image of a burst of white strobe light, gone before he had really registered on the consciousness.

How he had learned his trade no one knew. Almost incandescent himself, in the dim basements of the squats, among foundations laid in other centuries, he took on an almost preternatural appearance. When he took his clamps and tapped the old houses into the city power supply, his eerily thin figure became seemingly transparent; the blue arc he created seemed to be a doorway to Hell being forced open from the inside, with only his own insubstantial form between his awestruck audience on this side, and something unspeakable on the other.

For this service he charged five quid, on condition that he be permitted to tell the present occupants of a house the story of its past inhabitants.

Usually his tales were quite dull, little more than parish register recitations of births, marriages, deaths, and death tax sales. Occasionally he came upon a bit of nineteenth-century scandal—a dotty relative or a bastard child—but for the most part his stories were factual to the point of dullness. And yet, once told they changed the character of the house.

Rooms that had once been anonymous now seemed possessed by the presence of other, vanished occupants. They began to be inhabited by a feeling of someone having just left them, or of someone poised on the threshold, just about to enter.

Perhaps it was imagination, as some said. Perhaps it was the power of suggestion. But in rooms that Flicker lighted there seemed always to be an extra shadow, something one was always catching a glimpse of just as one turned away.

And there were other things. There were stories that were whispered among the denizens of the squats, traded about by the wraithlike, pale, ragged, chapped squatters who made a home for themselves in the places that had been abandoned by everyone else long ago. Stories of things that came, seeking the light. Or seeking something more.

## VII

Flicker's knocking was a soft, incessant tapping which carried nevertheless through the rooms on the ground floor and mocked the huge brass knocker by the smallness of the sound.

Peveril put away his writing materials, drained his glass, and rose. Crossing the front hallway, he flung open the heavy front door and stood frozen, momentarily, by shock.

Just beyond the threshold and seeming to float disembodied in the black night air was a face so pale that it appeared luminescent. Mirrored spectacles hungrily gathered the light from the candles in the hallway and held up for Peveril a double image of his startled reaction. Instinctively, he began to close the door.

"Peveril?"

A voice, so gentle that it might have been nothing more than an errant wisp of night air, spoke his name. It waited.

"Yes. Flicker?"

"Yes."

"Ah. Come in, then. You're expected. Harold Foxe ..."

With a sudden forward motion, as if propelled by some unperceived gale, Flicker entered, his black leather clothing catching the red glow from the fire in the front room. The door banged shut behind him.

He was skeletally, impossibly thin. Peveril was reminded of certain tomb effigies which had been pointed out to him as a child—the noble knight, his feet resting on a faithful dog and his hands clasped in eternal prayer above, but below entombed in stone filigree the cadaver, carved in pale native stone, brittle, white, and corrupt ...

"... actually seen the house, but yes, this is it, I'm quite sure of it. The original structure."

Peveril's thoughts returned to the present. He smiled, mumbled something, made ushering, hostlike motions toward the front parlor.

"May I just set these here?"

It was only then that Peveril noticed the heavy rubber mats that his guest held under his arm.

"Yes, anywhere you like," said Peveril. "Then do come and sit by the fire for a moment. Would you like a drink?"

"A little wine, perhaps."

Peveril fetched a glass of sherry, poured himself another

drink, stirred up the fire and stood expectantly by the hearth.

Flicker accepted his glass, holding it before the mirrors of his eyes. Rich red light seemed to hang in suspension in the center of the glass. Slowly his head turned as he took in the entire room. His fingers gently caressed the glass, then dropped to play along the runnels carved along the arm of the chair. He seemed to be relaxing completely into his surroundings. When he spoke, his voice was so gentle that Peveril took it at first to be the hissing of a log on the fire.

"This house belonged to the Walclare family, were you aware of that? He—Mr. Walclare himself—had it built to his specifications."

"What sort of specifications?" Peveril inquired.

"Oh, the thickness of the walls, the soundproofed ceilings, and, especially, that warren of rooms on the top floor. Servants' quarters, most people would take them for. But why would servants' quarters all open in upon each other instead of into a common passage? And why would the only two doors be at opposite ends of the house, just at the top of the stairs?"

"You've been here before," Peveril ventured.

"No," said Flicker. "I'm quoting. This is what Sgt. Rouse of the C.I.D. had noted in his pocketbook. He was jotting notes and tapping on walls while waiting for his superiors to arrive, to be present when the doors were forced open. A few moments later he had his answers."

"What did they find?" asked Peveril.

Flicker's lips twisted, a grimace of distaste or a sardonic smile. "Do you know what satyriasis is?" he asked.

"I think so," Peveril began.

"It is a morbid lasciviousness in men, as nymphomania is in women. These may be outmoded terms to us, but the Victorian mind was still a mystery to itself. Freud hadn't come along yet to explain sexuality and all its many aberrations. And Mr. Walclare *was* an aberration."

"What do you mean?" asked Peveril. "I mean I've seen his art collection, so I know that he was something of a panty-sniffer. That's one of his less offensive acquisitions over there." He indicated a lithograph hanging over the mantle, depicting Zeus and Maia in the latter's Arcadian cave, disporting themselves in a thoroughly unseemly manner.

Flicker laughed softly, a dry, papery sound, a mummy's

mirth. "He collected more than etchings," he said. "His tastes went beyond art appreciation, beyond voyeurism."

So saying, he began his tale in earnest.

### VIII

Linden Walclare was originally a Devon man of good stock, as they say, and true if Walclare Old House is an indication of the sturdiness of its builders. Erected in 1608 on a knob of land overlooking a vast tract of bog and moor, it stands virtually unaltered to this day. The present owners do cream teas for the tourists in season, and for a few extra pence will show you the hidey-hole which the Walclares dug out during Cromwell's time to hide the local priests.

"Our Mr. Walclare was born in that same house in 1849. There seemed to have been nothing very odd about his upbringing—he was raised a Catholic, which was a bit unusual in those parts but not unheard of—nothing to suggest his later behavior.

"In due time he married Emma Hawtree and they settled in at Walclare Old House, presumably at the request of the senior Walclares. This was in 1879. A portrait of Emma painted at about this time shows her to be quite a beauty. Fair she was, with hair so blond that it seemed almost white and skin that looked almost translucent. She was only nineteen when she married Linden, and so she was only twenty when the accident befell her.

"It was the hunt. A wet day, an unruly mount, and Emma was pulled, almost lifeless, from beneath her thrashing horse. Both their backs were broken.

"Emma was carried back to Walclare House—she never walked again—and was never seen in the neighborhood again. Perhaps there had been morbid stirrings in the mind of Linden Walclare prior to his wife's accident. Perhaps her misfortune was the catalyst which took his nightmarish fantasy and made it a reality.

"In the spring of 1881, Walclare announced his intention of building a townhouse. He wanted, he said, to move his wife to London, to seek out expert medical opinions. And so he purchased the property at 213 ——— Street, had an existing house demolished, and built a new one—this one—in its place.

"He and his invalid wife moved into the house in the autumn of 1882. And that was when his reign of terror began."

Flicker paused in his narrative. Setting down his glass, he drew a packet of Benson and Hedges cigarettes from his pocket, lit one, and, cocking his head, blew a wraith of smoke into the center of the room. It hung for a moment between himself and Peveril, a dramatic sort of gesture, Peveril thought. It frightened him anyway.

It had grown dark outside and the wind had come up. Somewhere above, a loose shutter was banging erratically. Peveril rose and lit the oil lamps, heaped more fuel on the fire, and drew the curtains.

Flicker waited. Peveril took a seat.

"In January of 1883, Emma's family received a telegram from Walclare stating that his wife's condition was deteriorating rapidly. A second telegram followed on the next morning, declaring that she had died during the night; and certainly someone had, for a death certificate was issued by a Dr. Philipps, coroner, for one Emma Walclare, aged twenty-two, from pneumonia. Walclare had her remains interred at Highgate Cemetery in London, rather than in her native Devon, due, he said, to the severity of the winter and the uncertainty of travel. None of her own family was in attendance.

"So. Our Mr. Walclare is alone in his London home. What does he do? We know very little of his daily existence for the next twenty-seven years. We know that he was attending to his business interests from the portfolio which was found after his death, but these were simply investments. Ostensibly, he must have appeared as sane and sober as any man in London. He may have gone to the theater, dined at Claridge's and the Savoy; he may even have entertained guests in this very house. These activities would all have enhanced the secret delight of what he calls in his diary 'playing with my little darlings.'

Flicker paused. Reaching into his pocket again, he drew out a frayed and stained cloth-bound book.

"I got this at an estate sale," he said. "An amazing story in itself, but not one to concern us here. Listen:

25 Nov., 1898. Jeanette tonight. The most bewitching of my little darlings, and, having seen her dressed in radiant burgundy satin trimmed with lace, the loveliest as well. How she dotes on me! We had scarcely finished our supper this evening when she began to beg me to bed her. Sitting in her small room, she leans across the table, the candlelight giving her

skin a soft, rubicund glow. She loosens the bodice of her gown and lifts out a perfect, pendulous breast, like a lovely fruit for my inspection. Cupping it delicately in one hand she plays her fingers gently along the soft orb of its surface. I watch in fascination as the aureole deepens from pink to rose, the nipple becomes a tight, dark berry. Lifting it with both hands now, she offers this perfect fruit to her own lips. Her tongue flicks and moisture glistens on it in the candlelight as with a gesture of generosity and a purr of pleasure in her throat she offers this swollen orb of love to me.

Flicker closed the book.

"There is nothing whatsoever in this diary entry which we would call odd or unusual," he said. "Many wealthy men had mistresses at this time, and many preyed upon the urban poor in search of erotic pleasure, finding it enhanced by the squalor of the stews and dross houses and the sense of mystery and danger which was ever present in the slums. Many of them kept erotic diaries such as this as well, documenting their affairs and adventures. The odd thing about our Mr. Walclare is that he kept nothing but erotic diaries, beginning in 1893, and continuing until his death in 1910. He seems in his younger years to have been a pedophile, since his entries speak of children as young as eleven and twelve.

"In his later years, he has developed a taste for slightly older women of twenty or thereabouts, still young, but mature enough to join him in his little games."

Flicker removed a second book from his jacket.

"Listen to him in 1900:

4 April. Therese, dressed in habit of a nun. I lay her back on the sweet-scented virginal linen of her narrow bed and raise her skirts to her waist. Her hands protest weakly, beating about my ears like the beating of the wings of a dove. I part her legs and inhale her sea-scent, take her tender-pink oyster flesh into my mouth. A precious pearl of her love emerges from the recesses of her quim. One by one I devour these, delighting as their salt bursts on my tongue while above me I hear the soft clacking of her beads and the sussurrant murmur of her futile prayers.

Flicker closed the diary.

"Walclare died in this house, apparently of a stroke, on or about the first of September, 1910. His remains were discovered by his charwoman when she arrived for work. His solicitors were

called, his body taken away, and the house secured and sealed pending the arrival of his executor and sole heir, a nephew who was living in Glasgow. He arrived two weeks later, and together with Walclare's solicitors came to the house to inventory the contents.

"The smell at the top of the house told them that something was dreadfully wrong. The police were quickly sent for, the doors were forced open, and Mr. Walclare's nasty little secrets were exposed.

"Behind the locked doors, a series of rooms opened one upon another, boxcar fashion. In each was found the body of a female—to call them women would be to mock the word. Five in all, they ranged in age from perhaps fifteen to perhaps thirty. Each had died of apparent neglect. Each was found lying on the floor of one of the small, celllike rooms, apparently vainly trying to open the connecting door which led to the cell next door. Strangely, none of these doors was locked. It seemed as if the creatures merely lacked the strength to reach them. The coroner later noted that the limbs in all five cases had a withered, atrophied appearance, 'As do those of invalids, or perhaps having been confined for long periods of time.'

"The skin,' he noted, 'in each case is extremely pale, almost transparent. Their faces, all remarkably similar and childlike in appearance, are smooth and unlined, devoid of the markings left by joy or sorrow as one passes through life.'

"The autopsies revealed another very interesting fact. While the limbs were withered, certain other . . . anatomical parts . . . were grossly overdeveloped." Flicker flashed a grin, unpleasant as a chapless skull's. "It seemed as if the five of them had, indeed, spent a lifetime in bed.

"These grim discoveries prompted a thorough search of the house and grounds. In the basement, it was noted, the earthen floor had been much disturbed. The skeletal remains of seven infants were unearthed, pitifully jumbled into a common hole. And in the garden, the body of a woman and that of another infant were found buried in a trash-filled pit behind an allotment shed.

"The coroner pieced all of this evidence together, and came to some rather horrifying conclusions.

"Apparently, Walclare was quite insane even before he brought his invalid wife to London, for the top floor rooms seems to have been designed expressly for the use to which they were

put. For his wife did not pass away in 1883 as her family was told. She did not, in fact, die until 1905, by the coroner's reckoning, and when she did, it was in childbirth."

## IX

Peveril had been staring into the fire while Flicker talked. He raised his eyes now to the latter's face, white as bone, and inscrutable behind its mirrored lenses.

"Then the five upstairs were . . ."

Flicker bared his teeth. "Walclare's own daughters. Bred to do nothing but satisfy his perverted lusts, those five windowless rooms were nursery, brothel, and finally tomb for them. They probably never left them. They must have walked little, if at all; it may be that they were never taught to speak more than a few phrases. He dressed them as one would dress a large doll, propped them this way and that, bathed them, perfumed them to his liking and played with them."

"But his wife . . ." Peveril began.

"Everyone thought she was dead. A quadriplegic, hidden away at the top of the house, she was lost. But fertile—still capable of bearing his children. His playthings."

"Who was buried in her place?" Peveril reached again for the gin.

A third small pocket diary appeared. "Here," said Flicker. "Let Walclare tell you himself:

"'15 January, 1883. I am in need of a surrogate for Emma. Have gone nightly to the — Road area, and have seen a girl who will do nicely. Fair haired and blue-eyes, but coarse. Susan is her name.'

And then:

"'16 January, 1883. How easily she was lured here with the promise of a tot of gin, a crumb of food! She lies before me now. My "love philtre" has done its work well! Soon I shall dress her in Emma's fine silk and place Emma's gold ring upon her finger. But first I must have her in this, her state of innocence. Cool, she is, and fragile to behold, possessor of the blackest of mysteries, which I shall penetrate . . ."

Flicker closed the little diary with a snap. "What do you suppose?" he asked. "Walclare waxing poetical as he watches his young mistress sleep? Or a man about to engage in necrophilia? We hear no more of Susan."





## X

Peveril sighed unhappily. "How pathetic it all is," he said. "And no one ever suspected him of any wrongdoing."

Flicker rose languidly, stretching with feline pleasure.

"Never. He was a model of urbane manhood. His servants found him a pleasure to work for, and his peers found him to be gentle, kind, and even, it was said, soft-hearted."

"What of the infants in the cellar?" Peveril asked.

Flicker shrugged. "Male infants. Stillborns. No one knows, really. Their pathetic remains were gathered up and reinterred in consecrated ground." He remained standing. "Speaking of which, perhaps it's time we went down and had a look in the basement." A flash of teeth.

Peveril rose silently and began to usher his guest to the back hallway. Pausing to survey the room while the latter gathered his implements and mats, he noted that Flicker had set his glass aside, leaving the wine untouched.

## XI

Peveril led his guest down the corridor which ran the length of the house. To the rear, behind the main staircase, was the cellar door. He unbolted it and shone his electric torch down the long flight of stairs.

Moisture glistened on the mineral-rimed stone walls, and there arose a smell of richly fungal earth and rotting timbers. He descended cautiously, Flicker moving behind him, a shadow blacker than the darkness itself save for the livid face which floated bodiless in the fetid air.

They located the electrical box with little difficulty. The process itself took very little time. Flicker laid out his rubber mats, took up his clamps, and in a matter of seconds sent an arc of blue light racing over his head. A shower of sparks seemed to drip from his fingertips as the arc widened and a cloud of acrid smoke filled the room, enveloping the skeletal figure who seemed to hold the power of a raging storm above his head. The theatrical effects dissipated suddenly, to be replaced by the reassuring hum of twentieth-century electrical current.

Flicker stepped back. "There you have it," he said. "You're back in touch with the world." He gathered up his tools. Peveril took the opportunity to examine his surroundings.

"Where do you suppose he disposed of the children?" he

queried.

Flicker looked up. "To the back of the house, I should think. Over there." He indicated with a lift of his chin a heavy, iron-studded door set in the stone wall. A large, rusted padlock hung from its latch. But the thing that made Peveril gasp and which even evoked a barely repressed ejaculation of surprise from Flicker was that at the bottom of the door, where in places it failed to meet the uneven hard-packed earth of the floor, shone a thin band of pale blueish light.

"Somebody's left a bulb in its socket back there is all," said Flicker. And as if to reassure them that this was so, they found several others burning in their sockets in the upstairs corridor.

Peveril saw his guest to the door. Outside snow and rain mingled, driven horizontally by the wind. Flicker stepped over the threshold and was immediately engulfed by the darkness—invisible before he reached the gate. It screamed in surprise as his unseen hand reached to open it.

Peveril closed the door firmly and bolted it securely against intruders. *But what, he wondered, am I locking in?*

At length, having downed several large brandies in order to calm his nerves and having dutifully recorded the particulars of his strange visitor in his journal, Peveril yawned hugely several times, rose, banked the fire, and prepared to retire for the night.

He had been working by the light of one of Harold's lamps which sat on his writing table in the front parlor. He gathered the other one up and carried it with him to his bedchamber, setting it on the nightstand beside his bed. He was truly entranced by the loveliness of the workmanship, and of the subject as well, and after getting into bed Peveril lay for a long while with the book that he had intended to read propped on his chest, watching the play of light among the crystal water beads, and the delicate, rubicund glow of the molded curves of the diminutive bronze limbs. The hour had passed midnight, and the storm had begun to keen in the eaves and to bang the loose shutters when he finally shut off the light and settled contentedly in among his shawls and comforters.

In one corner, an electric heater pinged and popped and gave off the melancholy odor of a long-neglected appliance, while across the room the embers of a coal fire glowed and gave off a low hiss as snow came tumbling down the chimney to its death. Warmth and light having been restored to him, Peveril fell asleep

a happy man.

Once told, a tale takes deep root in the imagination. From the drawing room came the sound of the mantle clock chiming three. The room was suffused by the lambency of a snowy night. Awake, Peveril noted that the wind had ceased. He closed his eyes and was just preparing to drop back to sleep when a noise somewhere inside the house brought him fully awake.

It was a little noise. Coming unexpectedly, he had been unprepared and so unable to tell from whence it had come or what it might be; he lay, consequently, rigid and barely breathing for a quarter of an hour lest it should repeat itself.

Again. From the rooms at the top of the house came the sound of something moving. A soft, sweeping sound. A floorboard creaked, and then silence descended once more. Peveril groped for the light at his bedside. The crystal beads clicked softly like nuns at prayer and the room was filled with reassuring light. Peveril grinned to himself. A resounding silence prevailed. He turned off the light.

He awoke again just as the window began to emerge from the darkness which surrounded it as a dark lavender square of first light. He would have dozed again, but he realized with a thrill of fear which paralyzed him, stopping even his breath, that there was a small, moist, very cold hand gently clutching his own.

It seemed to take him ages to close his eyes again, fearing to look at whatever stood beside him. He began to scrape a ragged, painful breath into his lungs with which to shriek at this formless terror when a small voice close to his ear said, "Happy Christmas, Uncle Pevvie!"

His four-year-old niece Evita stood at his bedside, wearing a scarlet coat with a fur-trimmed hood. Fur mittens dangled from her sleeves on strings meant to keep them from being mislaid.

"Mummy said that you wouldn't be up yet," she said. "But it's Christmas! We'll go to Nanny's if only you'll get up, and there'll be presents and carols and ever such a lovely tree just like last year. Hurry, Uncle, please!"

Peveril opened his eyes. He smiled tenderly at the child, breathing as regularly as the tachycardia which she had caused would permit.

"Go to your mother and tell her I'll be down directly," he said. "And tell your father that there's a bit of brandy in the

decanter in the front room if he feels the need for a stirrup cup." So saying, he urged her out of the room and closed the door behind her. Only then did he realize how violently he was trembling.

## XII

The van seemed to overflow with bags and parcels and children. Never having driven an automobile himself, Peveril marveled at his brother-in-law Michael's ability to concentrate on the road while around him Christmas crackers exploded, small voices wailed, and snatches of Christmas carols were sung and then left off in mid-verse. Peveril's sister, Susannah, sat beside her husband in the front seat. Her youngest was seated on her lap, alternately eating chocolates and wiping his soiled fingers on his mother's coat front. Sitting beside the window, Peveril watched as the light began to stretch out over the landscape. A heavy frost lay upon the fields, giving them the look of a shimmering lake.

He pressed his forehead against the cold glass, his breath fogging the passing scene. He had slept badly on the previous night. Flicker's visit had filled him with a sense of unease. Noises which before had been nothing more than the senile drooling of antique plumbing or the arthritic creak of ancient wooden joints complaining of the cold seemed somehow sinister now. Whereas before he had always feared that a lack of light in the old house might attract vagrants and vandals, he had now begun to fear that having light might also have attracted something. Things could see him now; things could locate him amid the passageways and the dark, silent rooms. He closed his eyes and tried to relax amid the bright fields outside and the incredible din within the car. A small, cold hand slid into his and squeezed gently, and he smiled softly to himself, remembering his morning's fright. He squeezed it softly in return. He did not turn, and so he did not see his niece Evita, seated beside him, her small fur-mittened hands folded firmly in her lap.

## XIII

Christmas proceeded as it always did with Peveril's family. There was a great deal of noise. Children were in such abundance that names were forgotten, parcels and packages mislabeled and mislaid, gifts were exchanged and reexchanged, and three of the older nephews managed to get quite tight on sweet sherry

several hours before dinner. Peveril somehow received a silk fringed shawl which had been intended as a gift from one of his sisters to another, but he was so deeply touched by it and seemed to like it so sincerely that no one had the heart to reveal the error. Dinner was a protracted and widespread affair, tables being laid in the dining room, kitchen, the library, and the front parlor. The food had been in such great abundance that one of his sisters had wondered aloud whether they had left anything for the rest of the country to eat. Wassail and mulled wine were followed by cider and eggnog and spiced rum. Then everyone sat down to paté and scotch eggs, Brown Windsor soup and oyster stew, turkey and pheasant and a whole suckling pig, stuffings with chestnuts and oysters and sausages, great round barrows of mashed potatoes, aspics, market loads of vegetables, and followed by fruitcakes and rum balls and a plum pudding which called for the lights to be dimmed and was carried in flaming, eerie and blue.

Everyone grew quite full, and the children began to grow quite still, surfeited at last.

The afternoon began to dull, and a sleeting rain began to fall outside. Curtains were drawn, fires were tended, little ones were taken upstairs for their naps, and a kind of weatherbound snugness seemed to envelop the house and its occupants.

From the kitchen came the sound of washing up; the clatter of plates and cups, the clash of silver utensils, and the pleasant, domestic murmur of Peveril's mother and sisters chattering and laughing about their work.

Peveril wandered from room to room, chatting with his brothers-in-law, talking over his finances with his father, and marveling at the sight of his older nieces and nephews. They were a strange and exotic sight all gathered together like that—their clothing glittering with metal studs and buttons, and their hair an array of pinks and blues and lavenders, leopard spotted, striped, shaved, worried into cats' ears, or cropped into arabesques. Peveril realized with a slight pang that at twenty-six he was becoming hopelessly aged.

"Come join us in here, Pevvie, we're having a story!"

A nephew—Matthew, or Mattias?—poked his head out of the library. His hair, the color and texture of wheat stubble, was enhanced by a vivid green forelock. Peveril stepped into the room.

The floor was littered with young relations. Younger children

had been gathered into the laps of the older girls, while the older boys were heaping logs onto an already-leaping blaze. Chestnuts were being passed amid squeals and singed fingers, mulled wine was poured out, and the curtains were tightly gathered against the rapidly approaching night. A wind had begun to stalk patiently about the house, seeking a way in. The lights were extinguished.

Peveril looked about. In the firelight, the children looked unearthly; he was reminded of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Names like Poppy and Harebell and Peaseblossom would suit them better than Michael and Nathan and Jane. He took a seat in a chair by the fire and waited.

"Well, what sort of story shall it be, then?" his nephew asked, rubbing his hands together briskly.

"A ghost story!" they had all shouted in unison.

"A ghost story, of course," replied the nephew gaily. "But what sort of ghost?"

"What do you mean, what sort of ghost?" asked one of the younger children.

The nephew winked at Peveril. He had taken up a narrator's stance before the fire, one elbow leaning on the mantle, his glass poised in the other.

"What I mean is that there are spirits of all sorts." He raised his glass at this, and some of the older lads grinned. "There are phantom armies that march forever along the routes which take them to the scene of their defeat. There are phantom hunts with phantom packs in full cry that ride at the full of the moon. There are headless coachmen drawn by teams of headless horses, wish hounds, hands of glory, phantom cats, black dogs, and an assortment of grey ladies, brown ladies, white ladies . . ."

"How white?" Evita was sitting at Peveril's feet. Her question was asked from behind an immense piece of barley sugar. She was clandestinely wiping her fingers in the carpeting.

The nephew regarded her quizzically. "What do you mean, how white?"

The child sighed in exasperation, as if anyone should know what she meant. "I mean, how white?" she repeated. "I met a lady on the stairway at Pevvie's house this morning, didn't I? And she was very white."

The nephew winked at Peveril lasciviously. "Did you," he said. "Tell us more."

But, sensing that she had said something inappropriate, the

child would say no more.

#### XIV

It was nearly midnight when Peveril's brother-in-law brought the van to a halt before the house in Camden Town. Sleeping children, tattered parcels, and broken toys littered the seats, and a smell of left-over food, which Peveril's mother had insisted on distributing to each of her children as they departed, hung in the overheated air. Peveril said his good-byes quickly and stepped out into the frigid night air.

A wave of uneasiness swept over him as he watched the van pull away. The house was in darkness, a black shadow pasted solidly against the grey-green haze of the city night. The iron gate shrieked its indignation when he pushed it. He tripped on a flagstone in the front walk, unnerving himself a bit more. He found himself trying to be as silent as possible about putting the key into the keyhole, tumbling the lock, lifting the latch. Barely breathing, he opened the door and stepped inside.

Silence greeted him, and the stale smell of a dead fire in the drawing room grate. He groped about for one of the candles which he always left on the hall table, lit it, and strode purposefully toward the stairway, glancing neither to the right nor the left. Upon reaching his bedchamber he locked himself in, double-locked himself in, in fact, before allowing a sigh of relief to escape his lips.

Turning round, he glimpsed his friend Harold's Christmas gift—the lovely little nymph lamp—glittering on his bedside table, the crystal beads catching his candle's light and sending a spray of fairy lights across the far wall. He reached for the lamp.

Bright, modern, twentieth-century light from the huge river dynamos flooded the room, dispelling shadows and relieving fears. Peveril dropped his coat, slipped into his dressing gown, and began building a cheerful fire in the grate. He soon had the flames dancing among the coals, and he augmented it with an ancient electric heater which he'd found in the lumber room, for the house seemed to have taken on a moldy dampness even in the short time that he had been away.

The room was soon quite snug, and Peveril lay in bed, feeling the house settling about him like a great, docile cat settling on a warm cushion. He was home, he reflected, in a place that he had made for himself. There was nothing frightening here. Mar-



riage, he reflected, had been truly frightening; it was so difficult to know how to care properly for human beings entrusted to one's care. But this was simply a sad, old Victorian house, and he had cared for it rather better than for most things. He lay for a short while admiring his new lamp. He must write to Harold and Olivia and thank them, he thought. Soon—tomorrow. He yawned contentedly and turned off the light.

It was shortly before three when the noise woke him. Still half asleep, he lay listening to the silence which ensued, half wondering if he had been awakened by a sound in a dream.

He may have dozed, or he may have become mesmerized by the silence, but, at any rate, the next noise occurred just after four.

It was a new noise, a soft, insinuating, touchy-feely sort of sound, of something moist which patted at the keyholes and felt its way around door jambs, seeking a weakness, patting, wheedling, clawing softly at the wood, softly and—oh!—so patiently, until

A latch clicked. Peveril reached out and groped for the light. His own door remained locked, he noted. He glanced at his reflection in the dressing table mirror. He was white with shock. He made a face at himself, and turned out the light.

"Mice," he said aloud to himself as firmly as the tremor in his voice would allow. "Wind in the eaves. Wood contracting from the cold. Gashlicrumb Tinies in the basement and not one, but five Mrs. Rochesters roaming about in the upstairs passageway." He giggled nervously.

There was a furtive movement in the room just above his head.

At this point, Peveril thought of rising. He considered getting dressed, walking purposefully down the stairs and out of the house. Harold and Olivia could put him up for the rest of the night, and in the morning, he and Harold could come back with some mouse traps for the top-floor rooms. But he was warm. The underground trains had stopped running hours before, and would not commence running for several hours yet, and Harold's flat was a long walk away. Besides, he was becoming quite peeved by the turn things were taking, from the silly shocks that his nasty little niece had given him to the terrible lies that Flicker had told him about the house. His house! Silence had descended, and he fell

asleep again.

He was reawakened shortly before dawn by a creaking stair. It was, he knew, one that was quite close to the landing.

The fire had gone out in the grate. The electric heater glowed without illuminating. Outside, he could hear a windborne rain being splattered against the side of the house.

Peveril reached for the light. He was angry now.

*I will turn on the light, he thought. I will go to the door, unlock it, step out into the passageway, and see for myself that there is nothing there.*

The crystal water beads clacked faintly beneath his touch. He ran his fingertips along a cool, smooth thigh, gently cupped a softly molded belly, a breast, the tip of a tiny, lifted chin. At last he found the switch, turned on the light

And gave himself away.



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